



Course enhancement conversations: A holistic and collaborative evaluation approach to quality improvement in higher education

Journal:	<i>Evaluation Journal of Australasia</i>
Manuscript ID	EVJ-22-0003.R1
Manuscript Type:	Practice article
Keywords:	internal evaluation, academic quality, student evaluations, capacity building, collaborative evaluation
Abstract:	<p>This practice article describes the use of collaborative evaluation for institutional improvement leading to continuous learning at a regional university in Australia. [Name of university]'s Academic Quality Framework (2019) was developed in response to external drivers to improve practices relating to the comprehensive and systematic analysis of academic data. One aspect of the response was to introduce "course enhancement conversations", which were a collaboration between the central Academic Quality Unit and academic staff, including course teams and learning and teaching leaders within schools and faculties. A feature of these conversations was the use of sentinel rather than performance indicators of course (not teaching) quality to prompt the holding of conversations. Conversations were conducted in a spirit of constructive collaboration, where the shared goal was to support course teams to deliver an outstanding student experience. Through adopting a collaborative approach to evaluation, Academic Quality Unit staff were evaluation champions who gradually acculturated academic staff and learning and teaching leaders to evaluative thinking and data-informed decision-making. Issues brought to light during these conversations have informed changes in practice at the university level, including the development of a new evaluation procedure to embed best-practice monitoring and evaluation across all levels of curriculum delivery.</p>

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5 **quality improvement in higher education**
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8 **Abstract**
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12 *improvement* leading to continuous learning at a regional university in Australia. [Name of
13 university]'s *Academic Quality Framework* (2019) was developed in response to external drivers to
14 improve practices relating to the comprehensive and systematic analysis of academic data. One
15 aspect of the response was to introduce “course enhancement conversations”, which were a
16 collaboration between the central Academic Quality Unit and academic staff, including course teams
17 and learning and teaching leaders within schools and faculties. A feature of these conversations was
18 the use of sentinel rather than performance indicators of course (not teaching) quality to prompt the
19 holding of conversations. The sentinel indicator was then contextualised using course and survey
20 data during the conversations. Conversations were conducted in a spirit of constructive collaboration,
21 where the shared goal was to support course teams to deliver an outstanding student experience.

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23 Through adopting a collaborative approach to evaluation, Academic Quality Unit staff were
24 evaluation champions who gradually acculturated academic staff and learning and teaching leaders to
25 evaluative thinking and data-informed decision-making. Issues brought to light during these
26 conversations have informed changes in practice at the university level, including the development of
27 a new evaluation procedure to embed best-practice monitoring and evaluation across all levels of
28 curriculum delivery.
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31 **Key words**
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34 internal evaluation, academic quality, student evaluations, capacity building, collaborative
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Introduction

This [practice article](#) describes a case of using collaborative evaluation for institutional improvement leading to continuous learning (Third Author, 2014) at [name of university], a regional university located in Toowoomba, Australia.

Australian universities are required by law to monitor and evaluate their academic activities based on student feedback (see *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021* (Cth), s. 5.3.5). For the sake of both students and academic staff, [however](#), it is incumbent on universities to use any student feedback in an ethical and appropriate manner. As Kitto et al. (2019) note, “it is essential that decision makers and evaluators make use of best practice methods to analyse the data that [student evaluations of teaching] generate” (p. 339). [At \[name of university\], the approach has been to use student evaluations are used](#) as a sentinel indicator to stimulate an improvement conversation at the mid-semester point with key academic stakeholders. [The concept of the sentinel indicator is borrowed from ecology in which certain species are considered “sentinel” species because they provide an early warning of issues within the ecosystem. We The university adopt the view that views learning and teaching is as a complex ecosystem in which student evaluations data is are but one feature. This approach is supported by the widespread agreement in the literature that universities should ensure student evaluations are simply one facet of a comprehensive evaluation framework \(e.g., Abrami et al., 2007; Third Author et al., 2012; Marsh, 2007\). “eCourse enhancement conversations”¹ are held at the university for courses displaying the sentinel indicator and provide the impetus for an in-depth examination of the learning and teaching ecosystem. Conversations are an opportunity for collaborative learning and capacity building for academic staff stakeholders through the adoption of a holistic view of student evaluations, which are considered within the full ecosystem of extensive quantitative and qualitative course and survey data. These “course enhancement conversations” have been adopted as a collaborative and constructive process with an overarching vision to improve the quality of the student experience at the university.](#)

~~Course enhancement conversations provide an opportunity for collaborative learning and capacity building for all stakeholders through the adoption of a holistic view of student evaluations, which are considered within the context of extensive quantitative and qualitative course and survey~~

¹ Note the term “course” is used at [name of university] to refer to an “accredited unit” as defined by the *Australian Qualifications Framework* (2013).

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~~data. This approach is supported by the widespread agreement in the literature that universities should ensure student evaluations are simply one facet of a comprehensive evaluation framework (e.g., Abrami et al., 2007; Third Author et al., 2012; Marsh, 2007). Third Author et al. (2012) recognise the need in universities for an overarching evaluation framework “in which a valid, reliable, multidimensional and useful student feedback survey constitutes just one part [emphasis added]” (p. 261).~~

Before describing the development and implementation of the course enhancement conversation process in detail, we first contextualise the process by briefly discussing broader improvements at the institution which were required by the Australian higher education regulator. Within this context, the course enhancement conversations can be understood as an intervention to improve both curriculum and evaluation practice. We then discuss collaborative approaches to evaluation, and why adopting such an approach was appropriate in the context of the institution’s broader improvement agenda. We position the course enhancement conversations as a collaborative mechanism to respond to student feedback data in a way which supports academic staff and builds their capacity to make data-informed decisions on improving course quality.

Regulatory context and background

The development of a larger evaluation framework has been the focus of a sustained program of work at the university. The university’s *Academic Quality Framework* (Third Author, 2019a) was devised in direct response to a significant external driver for change. In 2018, the registration of the university as an “Australian University” under the *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency Act 2011* (Cth) was renewed on condition that (among other things) the Academic Board (the university’s academic governance body) demonstrates that it regularly receives comprehensive diagnostic analysis for each higher education program the university offers (TEQSA, 2018). To address the requirements of the conditional re-registration, the university commissioned work to develop a new quality assurance framework for academic activities—one that would facilitate stronger academic governance and allow evidence-informed strategic decision-making on the university’s courses, programs, and the student experience. The original concept for the *Academic Quality Framework*, subsequent rollout, and tracking of progress over time were captured in a series of reports that were endorsed by the university’s Academic Board to ensure thorough and transparent

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3 academic governance of activities under the framework (Third Author, 2019b; Third Author, 2019c;
4 [name of university], 2021).
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8 The development of the course enhancement conversations as part of the *Academic Quality*
9 *Framework* is an example of organisational *improvement*, one of the four academic quality elements
10 in Third Author's *Continuous Learning Framework* (2014), which also includes *accountability*,
11 *performance*, and *investment*. The continuous learning framework can be used by internal evaluators
12 to guide stakeholders towards evidence-based strategic decision-making with the goal for them to
13 become a continuous learning organisation. Deming's (1986) quality improvement cycle of *plan, do,*
14 *act, check* operates through each academic quality element. In the case of improvement and the work
15 to develop the *Academic Quality Framework*, this involved several iterations of different but
16 interconnected projects to improve data collection, reporting, and use to inform stronger academic
17 decision-making. At the level of course enhancement conversations, Deming's cycle also allowed for
18 iterative development and refinement of the process based on pilots and stakeholder feedback.
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28 When implementing new evaluation initiatives such as the *Academic Quality Framework* and
29 course enhancement conversations, the evaluation literature acknowledges the importance of
30 "evaluation champions" in generating momentum to change practice (Rogers & Gullickson, 2018).
31 Effective evaluation champions "work to bring evaluative thinking into their practice and positively
32 promote evaluation among their colleagues" (Rogers & Gullickson, 2018, p. 46). Championing the
33 use of data to inform decision-making on curriculum and course delivery was an important feature of
34 the course enhancement conversations, ensuring the university was addressing the issues raised by
35 the regulator in its conditional re-registration. As will be discussed further below, the early iterations
36 of the conversations involved staff from the university's Academic Quality Unit in championing
37 evaluation practice and critical thinking about the available data. As Rogers et al. (2019b) conclude
38 in relation to internal evaluation within non-government organisations:
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47 NGOs that have an evaluation literate workforce, who use the most appropriate form of
48 evaluation at the right time and who are assisted by internal evaluators to enhance evaluative
49 thinking and critical reflection, have an increased likelihood of achieving the greatest social
50 impact. (p. 16)
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55 This resonates strongly with Patton's (2008) focus on the vital importance of the personal factor and
56 the "presence of an identifiable individual or group of people who personally care about the
57 evaluation and the findings it generates" (p. 66; see also Patton, 2012). As will be discussed further
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~~below, while the initial evaluation champions at the university were members of the central Academic Quality Unit, significant resources have been dedicated to building the evaluation and critical reflection capacities of academic staff and academic leaders to ensure the greatest positive impact on the student experience.~~

It was noted in the Statement of Reasons for the university's re-registration condition that the university's quality assurance framework has historically been undermined by a lack of sophisticated data analysis (TEQSA, 2018). Thus, the requirement for comprehensive and systematic analysis of data was addressed in a three-phase process (from proof of concept to implementation), supported by several inter-dependent projects to improve the quality of the student experience. These projects included a new assessment strategy, a curriculum model and program structures initiative, and an academic governance project. A feature of the academic governance project was a recommendation by an external consultant to "establish a schedule of formal curriculum conversations at survey, course, discipline, program, school, faculty, university reporting to Learning and Teaching committee through the executive to Council" (Third Author, 2019a), including requirements that academics engage in semester-based course reviews, formal curriculum conversations supported by evidence-based reports, and the documentation of all curriculum conversations. This recommendation was based, in part, on concerns raised by academic staff that there was no standard for data presentation at the university, the data were being sourced *ad hoc*, and in some instances, bespoke data repositories were being built to suit specific contextual needs (Third Author, 2019a).

Additionally, the student [evaluation feedback](#) survey instrument at the university was radically revised in 2019 following an extensive literature review of 89 articles (2015-2019), a desktop audit of 41 Australian universities and 20 international universities (predominantly in the United States), and an analysis of the usage and validity of the student survey questions and administration processes using course data from 2016 to 2018 (Second Author, 2019). The review report included recommendations that:

- the survey length be drastically shortened to two questions, one on course satisfaction, and one asking students to reflect on their own contributions to learning;
- a mandated mid-semester check-in survey be administered to facilitate improvements to courses for the benefit of the current cohort;
- the survey be turned off for courses with 10 or fewer enrolments, in which case alternative methods of evaluation should be used; and

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- newly implemented school and faculty leadership and committee structures [be leveraged](#) to oversee course monitoring and evaluation activities.

This article focuses on the implementation of the last recommendation, namely the development of a collaborative system in which schools and faculties worked with the central Academic Quality Unit to consider student feedback survey data through the course enhancement conversations process.

This collaborative approach was seen as a fundamental feature of the university's quality framework, as it spoke to the commitment to adopt a holistic approach to institutional academic data. ~~This process has improved the student experience, successfully built the capacity of academics to engage in the academic quality endeavour, and informed best practice evaluation activity at the institutional level.~~

Championing evaluation through collaboration

~~When implementing new evaluation initiatives such as the course enhancement conversations, the evaluation literature acknowledges the importance of “evaluation champions” in generating momentum to change practice (Rogers & Gullickson, 2018). Effective evaluation champions “work to bring evaluative thinking into their practice and positively promote evaluation among their colleagues” (Rogers & Gullickson, 2018, p. 46). Championing the use of data to inform decision-making on curriculum and course delivery was an important feature of the course enhancement conversations, ensuring the university was addressing the issues raised by the regulator in its conditional re-registration. As will be discussed further below, the early iterations of the conversations involved staff from the university’s Academic Quality Unit in championing evaluation practice and critical thinking about the available data. As Rogers et al. (2019b) conclude in relation to internal evaluation within non-government organisations:~~

~~NGOs that have an evaluation literate workforce, who use the most appropriate form of evaluation at the right time and who are assisted by internal evaluators to enhance evaluative thinking and critical reflection, have an increased likelihood of achieving the greatest social impact. (p. 16)~~

~~This resonates strongly with Patton’s (2008) focus on the vital importance of the personal factor and the “presence of an identifiable individual or group of people who personally care about the evaluation and the findings it generates” (p. 66; see also Patton, 2012).~~

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The role of the Academic Quality Unit as evaluation champions working with academic staff stakeholders also resonates with a collaborative approach to evaluation. Fetterman et al. (2018) distinguish collaborative evaluation from other stakeholder involvement approaches such as participatory or empowerment evaluation by considering the role of the evaluator. Within collaborative evaluation, evaluators are “in charge of the evaluation” (Fetterman et al., 2018, p. 2, emphasis in original) and stakeholders contribute to improving evaluation design and data collection methods and analysis. This contrasts with participatory approaches, where evaluators share control with stakeholders, and empowerment evaluation, where stakeholders are ultimately in control of the evaluation (Fetterman et al., 2018). Collaborative evaluation is defined as “an approach in which there is a substantial degree of collaboration between evaluators and stakeholders throughout the process to the extent that they are capable of being involved” (Fetterman et al., 2018, pp. 10-11; Rodríguez-Campos, 2012). A collaborative approach to evaluation is well-suited to developing evaluation capacity in an organisation (Arnold, 2006). In addition to its appropriateness for capacity building, adopting collaborative evaluation was also seen as an important step towards a more constructive and holistic approach to student feedback, which has a fraught history in higher education.

Student evaluations in higher education

~~Before discussing the course enhancement conversations process in detail, we~~ We wish to acknowledge the contentious nature of student evaluations within higher education. While the student survey at [name of university] is a *course feedback* survey (~~not a teaching quality survey~~), student evaluations *more broadly* may relate to course content and outcomes and/or teaching practices (Heffernan, 2022). Regardless of their framing, student evaluations impact academic staff as important stakeholders in the process (Kitto et al., 2019). These impacts are more acutely and adversely experienced by certain groups and within certain disciplines and subject areas (Heffernan, 2022). Concerns have been raised in the literature regarding the anonymous nature of student evaluations and the impacts on the wellbeing of academic staff when feedback is not constructive or is offensive (Lakeman et al., 2021). Student evaluations are therefore a high stakes activity on multiple fronts: for academics in terms of career development, progression, and wellbeing (especially when framed as evaluations of *teaching*), for students to have an avenue for raising genuine issues of quality or to provide positive feedback, and for universities who have a regulatory requirement to collect and respond to student feedback ethically and appropriately for all stakeholders.

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3 We present [collaborative evaluation through](#) course enhancement conversations as one way to
4 use this sensitive data objectively and constructively to give academics the agency to make evidence-
5 based decisions about courses. [We liken this approach to a “data as partners” scenario, in which the](#)
6 [data \(of which student feedback data is only one component\) provide an opportunity for reflection](#)
7 [and learning. In doing so, we seek to take much of the emotion out of the consideration of student](#)
8 [feedback by viewing it as but one facet of a larger data ecosystem. We develop the view of course](#)
9 [enhancement conversations as a collaborative learning environment further below \(see “Facilitating](#)
10 [the conversations”\).](#) Conversations consider hundreds of lines of course and student survey data
11 during a qualitative conversation, and this represents a significant resource investment by the
12 university in improving the student experience. This investment demonstrates the depth of the
13 university’s commitment to improving practice and academic quality for the benefit of all
14 stakeholders, including students, academic and professional staff, university executive, and the
15 regulator alike.

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27 The remainder of this [practice](#) article traces the evolution of internal collaborative evaluation
28 practice [via in the form of](#) course enhancement conversations, from development to implementation
29 and finally [towards](#) the embedding of sustainable practice.

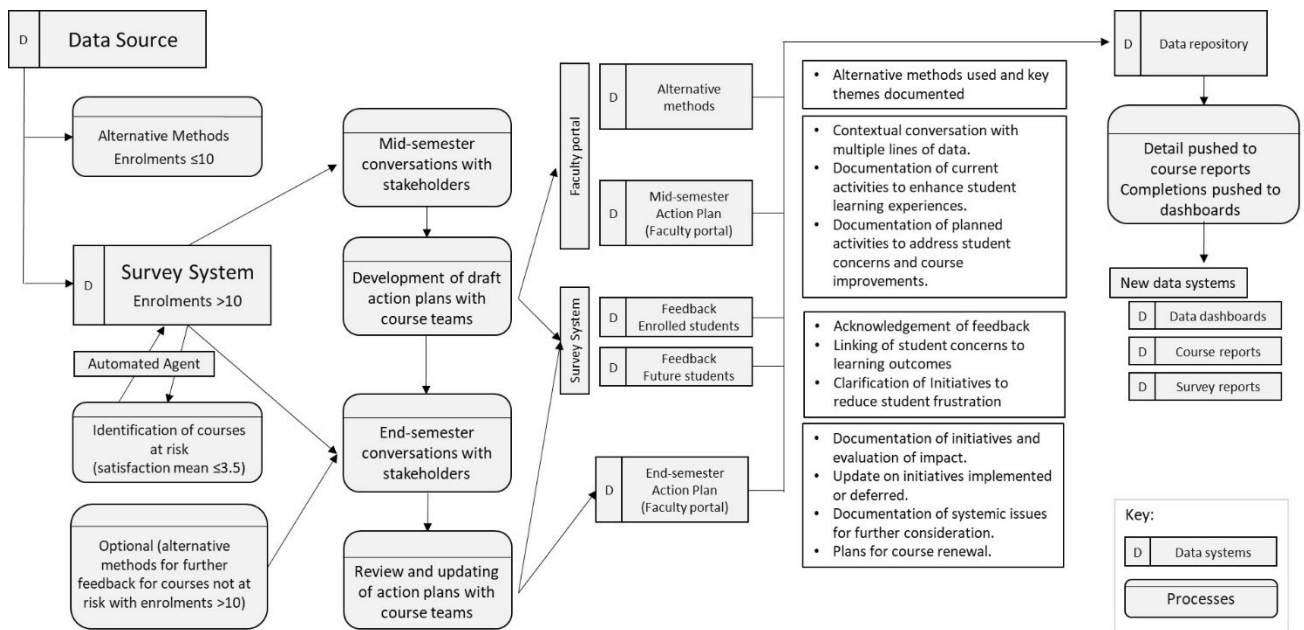
30 31 32 33 **[Development of the course enhancement conversation process](#)**

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36 [The following sections outline the evolution of the course enhancement conversations process. This](#)
37 [detail has been provided to assist other higher education institutions who may be considering](#)
38 [alternative approaches to the use of student evaluations of course quality.](#)

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42 Figure 1 [presents the workflow diagram developed to support the integration of current and](#)
43 [new data systems \(denoted “D”\) with the new processes required](#) for the launch of the university-
44 wide pilot of course enhancement conversations in semester one, 2020 (after a limited pilot in
45 semester three, 2019). In addition to the collaborative evaluation framework established to conduct
46 the conversations, significant technology resources were required to [provide access to current data](#)
47 [previously not available to course teams and](#) ensure academic activities [in response to data-driven](#)
48 [conversations](#) were being systematically captured and monitored.

Figure 1

Course Enhancement Conversations University-Wide Pilot Semester one, 2020



Survey and course reports

All staff across the university including course teams and relevant stakeholders received access to accurate, current, and relevant data on course consumption and enrolment trends as well as student progress. In addition, a specialised suite of course and survey reports ([name of university], 2019a and 2019b) were developed to provide access to current and historic student feedback. Restricted access to these reports was granted to current course teams, delegated support staff and delegated management staff. Significant investment was made in capacity building for all staff in reading, interpreting, and using the data contained in these automated **cohort-based** reports to inform decisions on curriculum. A total of 176 capacity building workshops were held with 2,090 attendees from across the university to support the implementation of the *Academic Quality Framework*. These course and survey reports capture extensive data that reflects contemporary practice and key performance indicators to meet academic quality imperatives.

The student survey instrument for the university's *Academic Quality Framework* is comprised of two questions on a Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neither agree nor disagree; 4=Agree; 5= Strongly Agree).²

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 - 4 1. I am satisfied with this course so far (mid-semester) OR Overall I am satisfied with this
 - 5 course (end-semester)
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 - 7 2. I have taken advantage of the learning opportunities offered in this course so far (mid-
 - 8 semester) OR I have taken advantage of the learning opportunities offered in this course
 - 9 (end-semester)
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13 Student responses to item 1 are calculated as a sentinel indicator of course quality. As discussed

14 above, the sentinel indicator is but one data point within a complex learning and teaching ecosystem.

15 For the student survey, an average score of 3.5/5.0 or less on the Likert scale 1-5 was determined to

16 be an appropriate sentinel indicator requiring further investigation. The average score of 3.5/5.0 was

17 identified by members of the academic executive as an appropriate testing point and one that could

18 be sufficiently resourced in terms of holding course enhancement conversations.

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24 The use of a sentinel indicator as opposed to a *performance* indicator is fundamental to the

25 intent and spirit of the *Academic Quality Framework*, namely, that all data points must be

26 contextualised within a broader set of course data to enable fair and meaningful discussion of

27 possible actions in response. Sentinel indicators make no final evaluative determination. Rather, they

28 are an indicator that further investigation into course context is required to determine whether a

29 genuine risk to quality exists. For the student survey, an average score of 3.5/5.0 or less on the Likert

30 scale 1-5 was determined to be an appropriate sentinel indicator requiring further investigation. The

31 average score of 3.5/5.0 was identified by members of the academic executive as an appropriate

32 testing point and one that could be sufficiently resourced in terms of holding course enhancement

33 conversations.

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43 Average scores within course surveys and comparisons of average scores across courses,

44 disciplines or organisational units become meaningless when undertaken devoid of course context

45 (Kitto et al., 2019). This foregrounding of course context as part of the evaluation activity—that is,

46 making the background context for the student evaluations explicit (Rog, 2012)—is a fundamental

47 feature of the course enhancement conversations. Course reports provide such comprehensive and

48 detailed data (over 700 lines of evidence) on enrolment trends, students carrying penalties, cohort

49 outcomes (pre-census withdrawal and progression and failure rates for 13 sub-cohorts), grade

50 distribution, assessment tasks (including pass and fail rates), teaching team, and summaries of past

51 student feedback. These course reports provide the essential context for meaningful discussion of

52 student feedback during course enhancement conversations.

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Implementation of the course : ~~Curriculum~~ enhancement conversations

A small-scale pilot of course enhancement conversations at mid and end semester three in 2019 involved all 68 courses offered in five schools and two faculties. This meant conversations were held with every course team to test the hypothesis that the sentinel indicator was appropriate. As a result, it was established that an average overall satisfaction score of less than 3.5/5.0 was a sound sentinel indicator of concern regarding the quality of the student experience ([name of university], 2021) to trigger a course enhancement conversation. The next phase was a university-wide pilot of mid and end of semester course enhancement conversations during semester one, 2020 (Figure 1).

In response to stakeholder feedback during these early iterations, several changes were made to the course enhancement conversations process. First, staff feedback indicated there should be a requirement for five or more responses to the student survey for a conversation to occur where the sentinel indicator resulted. Second, the presentation of survey reports was changed from a traffic light theme (green, red, and amber) to shades of blue, which was more in keeping with the use of a sentinel indicator and the non-judgmental spirit of the course enhancement conversations. Third, during the 2020 semester one pilot, the Academic Quality Unit facilitated both mid and end of semester conversations. After holding approximately four end-of-semester conversations, this activity was quickly shut down, as it became apparent that conversations were moving into the territory of academic staff performance, which was beyond the remit of the course enhancement conversations. Further, end-of-semester conversations were necessarily held prior to grades finalisation, which meant a vital piece of contextual data could not be made available to participants. In consultation with schools and faculties, the Academic Quality Unit continued to facilitate mid-semester course enhancement conversations, but for the foregoing reasons, the end of semester conversations became the sole responsibility of schools and faculties. This shift also began the transitional process of embedding monitoring and evaluation practice more deeply into the business-as-usual practice of the facilities and schools. Finally, in response to staff feedback, a *Course Enhancement Conversation Protocol* was developed in 2020 by the Academic Quality Unit collaboratively with one of the school associate heads of learning and teaching. -This protocol remains an important touchstone for the process. The early pilots resulted in a validation of the sentinel indicator where there were five or more responses and there was agreement between the course team that quality was at risk. These ongoing improvements to business rules and processes reflect the iterative nature of Deming's (1986) continuous improvement cycle of *plan, do, act, check*.

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During the most recent course enhancement conversations for semesters one, two and three of 2021, 78 courses (out of a total of 739 or 10% of eligible courses across the year) were involved in mid-semester conversations. These conversations with course teams were facilitated by the Academic Quality Unit for courses displaying the sentinel indicator of 3.5/5.0 or less, with five or more respondents in courses with 11 or more enrolments (courses with enrolments of 10 or fewer were excluded). Of the 78 courses, 16 of these were determined to be false flags where the course team agreed that considering other contextual factors and course and survey data, the sentinel indicator was not validated. Considerable resources were allocated to this activity by the university to recognise the importance of improving practice in response to student feedback—approximately 200 hours of staff time was spent in conversations involving some 271 staff. The university considers this allocation of resources as a worthwhile capacity building activity with a central focus on improving the quality of the student learning experience.

28 **Facilitating the conversations**

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The mid-semester course enhancement conversations have generally been facilitated by the Academic Quality Unit, with the aim of handing over facilitation in future to school associate heads of learning and teaching once capacity has been built.

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The first author was seconded to the Academic Quality Unit for 2021 from a school-based role as the associate head of learning and teaching. A feature of the conversations is that the facilitator comes from an academic rather than administrative background. This not only lends credibility to the facilitation, but can also enhance relatability, particularly where the facilitator has been a course convenor and had to respond to student feedback on their own courses. The first author brings academic expertise in collaborative learning and social theories of learning to their evaluation practice and facilitation (e.g., First Author, 2020; First Author, 2016). This background was ideally suited to a collaborative approach to evaluation (Fetterman et al., 2018; Rodríguez-Campos, 2012), particularly in consideration of power within the evaluation team. While the evaluator is “in charge” of the evaluation in collaborative approaches, the goal is to foster and strengthen evaluation practice (Fetterman et al., 2017). Within This chimes with collaborative learning environments based on social constructionism, in which the facilitator (or teacher) does not present as the sole holder of the “authority of knowledge”. Rather, the ~~assembled~~ group shares this authority and learns from their interactions with each other (Bruffee, 1998). Learning is approached as a shared goal and through

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3 joint problem solving (Bruffee, 1998). The first author's expertise in collaborative learning was well-
4 suited to the constructive intent of the course enhancement conversations, as their focus was on
5 gaining contextual understanding of the course delivery rather than adjudicating teaching
6 performance. Fundamental to the success of this process was the facilitator's ability (as an outsider
7 from a central unit) to quickly establish credibility and rapport with course teams to maximise the
8 learning that can result from social interactions where everyone is focused on a shared goal or
9 outcome (First author, 2022). This collaborative and constructive approach was clearly
10 communicated at the start of each conversation to put participants at ease and emphasise that the
11 catalyst for the conversation was a sentinel, not a *performance*, indicator. The facilitator then
12 outlined the format of the conversations. Attendees included the facilitator and note taker from the
13 Academic Quality Unit, the course convenor and any other teaching staff, and the associate head of
14 learning and teaching from the relevant school.

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25 All conversations follow a standard format. After introduction by the facilitator, the course
26 convenor provides some context for the conversation, including information on where the course sits
27 with program majors and programs, discussion of how the semester has commenced, the level of
28 student engagement, timing for the allocation of course convenorship, and development of course
29 resources. Then the facilitator steps participants through the course report, noting historical data on
30 withdrawal rates (pre and post census, identifying patterns in particular cohorts), progression rates
31 (referencing the government benchmark), issues regarding assessment (low pass rates for assessment
32 items, for example), and an overview of previous feedback and actions taken in response to improve
33 course quality. This foregrounding of context often raises important issues for discussion in relation
34 to the current round of student feedback, which is then considered via detailed examination of the
35 student survey report. Finally, the group discusses options for action to be taken in response to the
36 feedback and any support requirements. This information is captured in a course action plan written
37 by the course convenor after the conversation. The action plan is lodged in a central system for
38 record-keeping and accountability purposes. The course convenor closes the loop on feedback with
39 students via communications through the learning management system. After the course
40 enhancement conversations process is completed, monitoring of the implementation of action plans
41 becomes a school responsibility.

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56 The following vignette written by the first author describes an example of a course
57 enhancement conversation conducted at the mid-semester point during 2021, facilitated by the first
58 author on behalf of the Academic Quality Unit.

Vignette—Course enhancement conversation, semester two 2021

My colleague (who will be taking notes) and I check-in with each other before admitting the course team and associate head, learning and teaching into the Zoom meeting (we've been meeting like this since semester one, 2020 due to the impacts of COVID19 on in-person meetings): "Have you had a chance to read through the reports?" he asks.

"Yes, some really interesting stuff in there. It will be good to hear from the course team about how this first year course has been travelling this semester, given the big increase in enrolments from last year. That could pose some challenges for the teaching team."

"Yes, head count is up from 57 to 93—that's quite a jump," notes my colleague. "OK, let's bring them in and see how it's been going."

The course team and the school's associate head of learning and teaching join the Zoom. I introduce myself and talk very briefly about my background as an academic and my secondment to the Academic Quality Unit. This acts as an icebreaker to the conversation. Throughout my facilitation of the conversations this year (and in my previous school role), I've noticed many staff turn up to the conversations feeling (understandably) quite anxious until they are reassured about the process. I always outline the purpose and intent of the conversations, emphasising that the focus is squarely on the course and the contextual data, and that we are here simply to do some further "digging" into the data. For this course, 17 students out of 93 have scored their satisfaction at 3.5/5.0—just on the edge of triggering a conversation. I hand over to the course convenor who provides some context for the current offer. We learn that the course has two streams, one focused on research and the other on professional skills. The course convenor speculates that the jump in enrolments is most likely because the course is now available online for the first time, enabling greater access for those who may not be able to study on campus. This theory is supported by the course report data. The cohort analysis shows a diverse cohort, with numerous students from low SES backgrounds, five students with disabilities, and 37/97 students studying online. Several students are carrying penalties from previous attempts at the course, and the course convenor explains that some students who are new to university tend to struggle with the research stream.

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The convenor explains that the pre-census withdrawal rate is up (from 3% to 7%), but that most of these students have been in touch explaining that they were withdrawing for personal reasons. These students were thankful to the team and gave some positive feedback. There's a particularly vocal cohort of mature-aged students who are driving the culture of the course, and posts on the forum are being responded to promptly. The convenor notes that there have been some issues, however, including the late change to a tutorial time (after the start of semester) and course materials for the research stream not being available on time.

We are then advised that the course team met prior to the conversation to go through all the data from the course and survey reports and they have already discussed possible responses to the student feedback. They agreed that the research stream needs more resources to support students' learning and that principles of transition pedagogy need to be more fully embedded into the course. As facilitator, I recommended that the course convenor record positive feedback from withdrawing students in the course action plan and to close the loop with students by posting on the forum that the feedback provided at the mid-point was taken onboard by the teaching team and encouraging students to complete the end of semester survey.

I checked in with the course at the end of semester. The student survey response rate had increased from 18% to 25%, and the overall satisfaction with the course improved from 3.5/5.0 at mid semester to 4.4/5.0 by the semester's end. The course and survey report dashboards also indicated that the course team had written a course action plan at both points of the semester and recorded this plan in the system for future reference and quality assurance purposes.

This vignette demonstrates the positive outcomes for staff and students that can be achieved when the sentinel indicator is considered within the broader course context and is approached as being “non-judgmental” in and of itself. The vignette is based on an actual case and admittedly presents a “best-case scenario” for course enhancement conversations—mainly due to the excellent engagement of the course team in the process through their openness to student feedback, their careful consideration of the course and survey data, and their collaborative approach to formulating a response. The course team in this case was highly engaged and pro-active and used the course enhancement conversation to not only unearth important contextual information to resolve issues raised by students, but to record the positives about the course's delivery. The overall result was an

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3 improved student experience for the cohort in question, and improvements to course delivery that
4 will inform and enhance future course offers.
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8 **Concluding reflection: Towards sustainable practices**
9 **Creating an evaluation culture through**
10 **collaboration**

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12 Reflecting at the institutional level, the development of the course enhancement conversations is an
13 example of organisational improvement, one of the four academic quality elements in Third Author's
14 Continuous Learning Framework (2014) (see this special issue), which also includes accountability,
15 performance, and investment. The continuous learning framework can be used by internal evaluators
16 to guide stakeholders towards evidence-based strategic decision-making with the goal for them to
17 become a continuous learning organisation. Deming's (1986) quality improvement cycle of plan, do,
18 act, check operates through each academic quality element. At the level of course enhancement
19 conversations, Deming's cycle allowed for iterative development and refinement of the process
20 based on pilots and stakeholder feedback.
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29 One of the primary objectives of adopting a collaborative approach to evaluation through the
30 course enhancement conversations process was to champion evaluative thinking and build the
31 capacity of academic staff to make data-informed decisions on curriculum matters. As evaluation
32 champions, Academic Quality Unit staff modelled evaluative thinking for academic staff
33 stakeholders, providing the "personal factor" which Patton (2008) identifies as being so important to
34 success in evaluation activities. While Academic Quality Unit staff have generally facilitated the
35 conversations to date, the intention is for school associate heads of learning and teaching to take over
36 facilitation. This handover process is ongoing. Some associate heads have been facilitating since
37 early iterations of conversations; others who may be newer to the role are still building their
38 confidence to do so. The role of data champion, however, is gradually being taken up by these school
39 leaders.
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49 Academic staff are the primary intended users of the evaluation findings from course
50 enhancement conversations and are clearly best positioned to use these findings to effect change and
51 improve practice at the course level. Adopting a collaborative approach places stakeholders front and
52 centre in the evaluation activity, and directly affects use of evaluation findings, with evaluation
53 participants more likely to use (Johnson et al., 2009; Maloney, 2019). In their review on evaluation
54 use, Johnson et al. (2009, p. 377) found that "engagement, interaction, and communication between
55 evaluation clients and evaluators is critical to the meaningful use of evaluations". Anecdotally, many
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3 academic staff have commented on how much better equipped they are to use data to inform
4 decision-making on curriculum matters because of participating in the course enhancement
5 conversations. The impact of the course enhancement conversations process on academic learning
6 and teaching practices at the university is the subject of ongoing monitoring and future evaluation.
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11 The strategic use of collaborative evaluation and collaborative learning enabled a democratic
12 “bottom up” rather than “top down” approach to course evaluation. This in turn has created a new
13 culture of evaluative thinking within academic staff to use evidence to improve the student
14 experience. The university is now in its fourth year of conducting course enhancement conversations.
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16 The Academic Quality Unit tracks observations or themes across semesters to identify issues that
17 may be beyond the local control of course convenors and course teams. Figures 2, 3 and 4 are
18 spectrum displays for all the courses that were subject of course enhancement conversations for
19 2021. These displays demonstrate the results of using a sentinel indicator combined with extensive
20 quantitative data and qualitative contextual discussion. The benefit of this approach is that it yields
21 insights that are both particular to the course and general across courses—some issues have been
22 consistently identified across conversations across years and semesters, and others are germane to
23 certain semesters of offer or courses. Figure 2 shows how the thematic profile for each of the 34
24 courses for that semester is unique. Across courses, the most important and consistent issue
25 identified during course enhancement conversations since their piloting in 2019 relates to practices
26 of allocating courses and staff workload either to casual or ongoing staff with little to no lead time
27 before semester. During 2021, this practice continued to be an issue in 25 of the 78 course
28 enhancement conversations. As a result, this issue has been identified as a key threat to course
29 quality at the university and has generated detailed investigations into potential systems and practice
30 barriers to the timely allocation of casual contracts and teaching staff. These issues are now being
31 addressed in university policy and procedure. Other consistent indicators from course enhancement
32 conversations are that many courses displaying the sentinel indicator will also display either a pre-
33 census withdrawal rate higher than 10% (for 2021, 35/78 courses) or a progression rate of less than
34 80% (under the government benchmark—19/78 courses). When considered within the broader
35 course context, which may indicate issues with assessment or lack of early, low-stakes formative
36 assessment, these indicators will tend to validate the sentinel indicator that there is a genuine risk to
37 academic quality in the course.
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57 Other issues may “cluster” during certain semesters of offer and not appear at all in others. For
58 example, for the first time since the launch of the conversations, student feedback during semester
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two across multiple courses indicated that large increases in enrolments were impacting adversely on the student experience. This indicates that schools and faculties need improved planning and load forecasting methodologies to adequately resource their future course offers.

The most significant outcome of the course enhancement conversations is the confirmation that the quality of the student experience is impacted by a wide variety of influences, both within, and outside, the control of the course convenor. [name of university] continues to dedicate significant resources to course enhancement to support the unique context in which academic staff deliver courses to students. This was confirmed by the recent publication of the *Course Quality Assurance—Evaluation Procedure* which outlines a commitment to the course enhancement conversations up to 2024 and beyond.

Figure 2

Semester one, 2021 Mid-Semester Course Enhancement Conversation

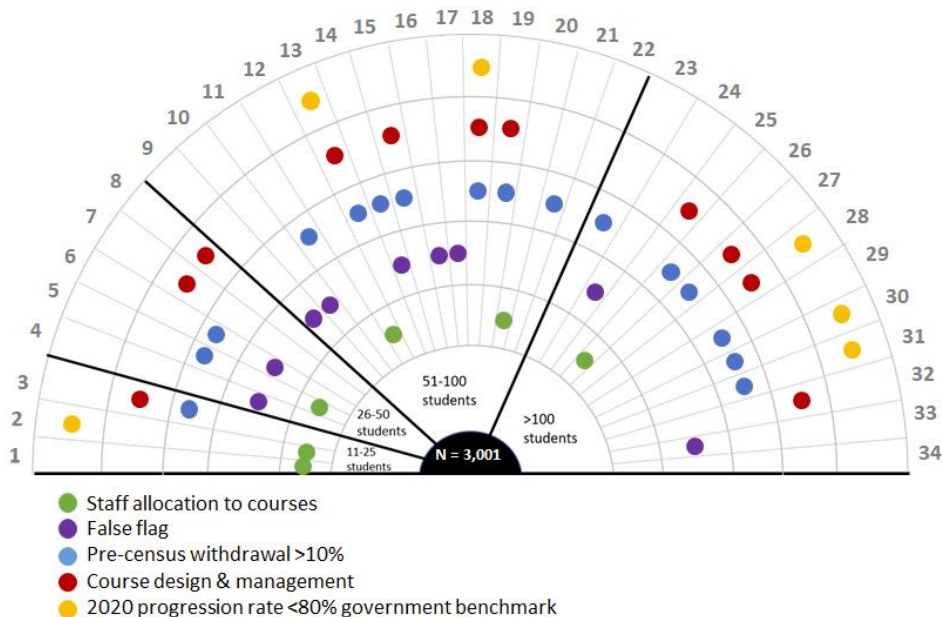


Figure 3

Semester two, 2021 Mid-Semester Course Enhancement Conversation

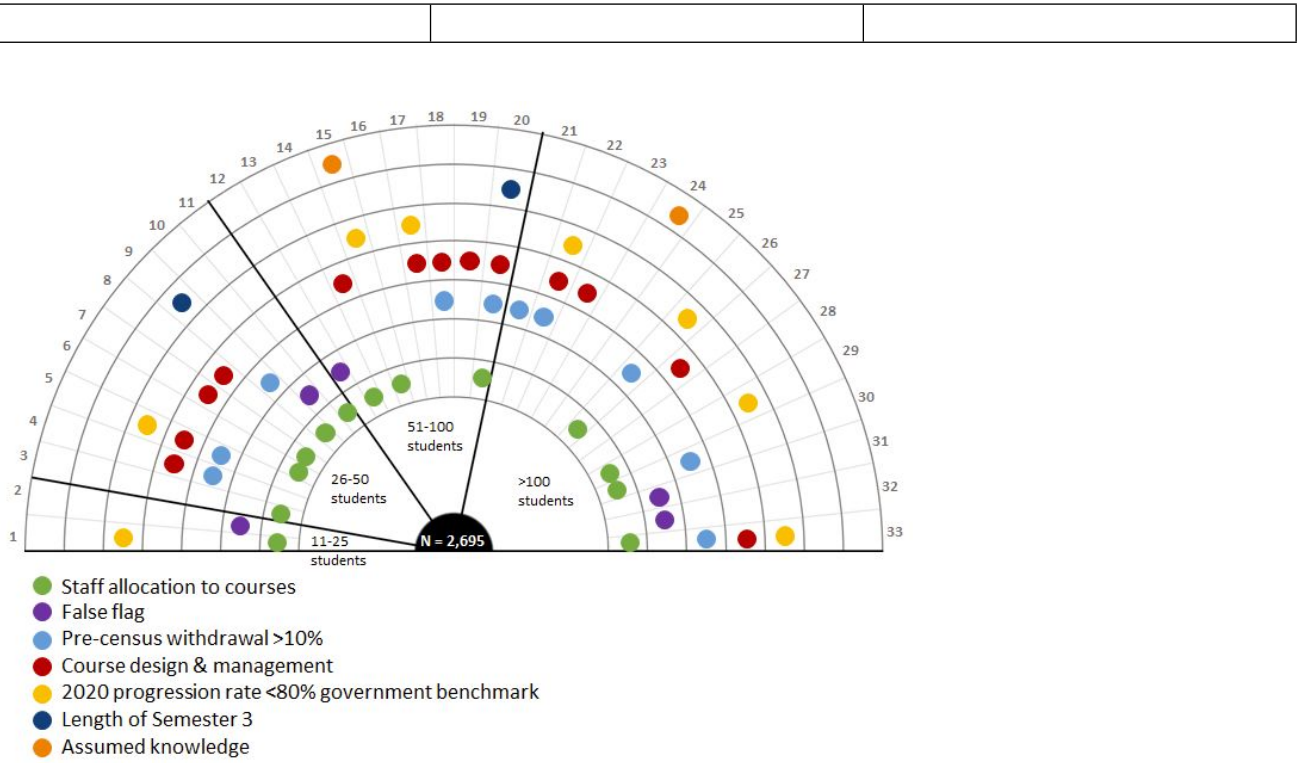
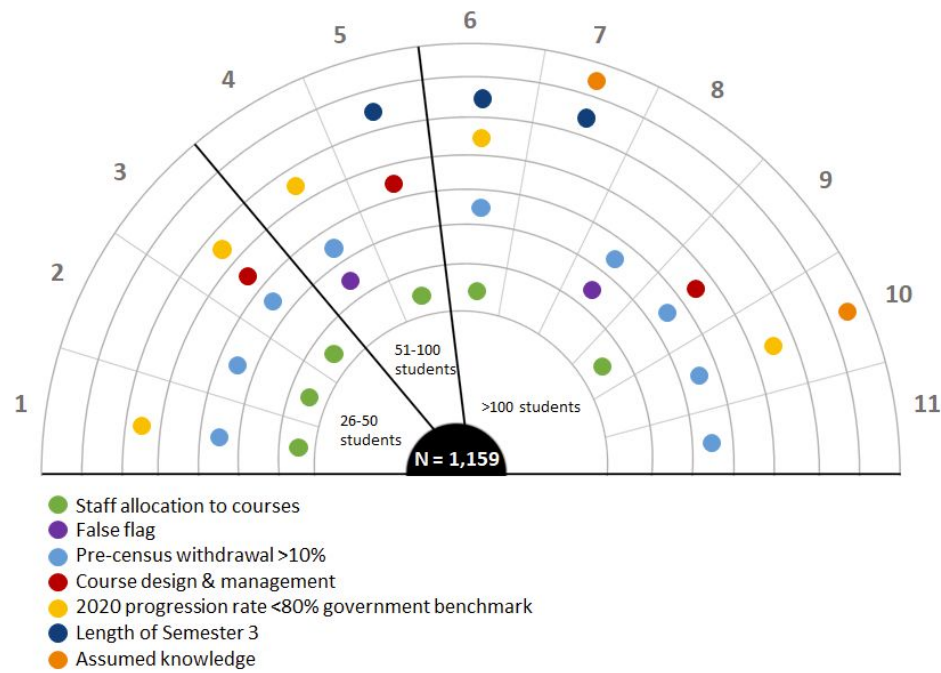


Figure 4

Semester three, 2021 Mid-Semester Course Enhancement Conversation



Conclusion

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~~This article has described a successful university-wide initiative to improve practice using student feedback as a sentinel indicator to stimulate an improvement conversation with key academic stakeholders at the mid-semester point. Succession planning will support changes in practice for academic and professional staff and equip schools and faculties with the skills and knowledge to facilitate the course enhancement conversations and fully embed evaluation practices into business-as-usual.~~

The university's Academic Board recently approved the new *Course Quality Assurance—Evaluation Procedure* signalling a new era for curriculum quality assurance at the university. The procedure captures the course-level practices outlined in this article, which evolved over a period of three years from 2019-2022. It also extends these practices to the major, program, and university level. The new procedure evidences the university's commitment to an evidence-based approach to curriculum quality assurance to deliver a high-quality learning experience for students. It is also the result of a whole-of-institution collaborative effort to consider academic quality data (including student feedback) contextually and constructively, which has positively contributed to [name of university]'s evolution as an organisation dedicated to continuous learning.

Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge Professor [insert name], Provost, [insert name of university], as sponsor of this special issue. The authors thank [insert name] for her assistance in copy editing this article.

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4 **Course enhancement conversations: A holistic and collaborative evaluation approach to**
5 **quality improvement in higher education**
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8 **Abstract**
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11 This practice article describes the use of collaborative evaluation for institutional *improvement*
12 leading to continuous learning at a regional university in Australia. [Name of university]'s *Academic*
13 *Quality Framework* (2019) was developed in response to external drivers to improve practices
14 relating to the comprehensive and systematic analysis of academic data. One aspect of the response
15 was to introduce “course enhancement conversations”, which were a collaboration between the
16 central Academic Quality Unit and academic staff, including course teams and learning and teaching
17 leaders within schools and faculties. A feature of these conversations was the use of sentinel rather
18 than performance indicators of course (not teaching) quality to prompt the holding of conversations.
19 Conversations were conducted in a spirit of constructive collaboration, where the shared goal was to
20 support course teams to deliver an outstanding student experience. Through adopting a collaborative
21 approach to evaluation, Academic Quality Unit staff were evaluation champions who gradually
22 acculturated academic staff and learning and teaching leaders to evaluative thinking and data-
23 informed decision-making. Issues brought to light during these conversations have informed changes
24 in practice at the university level, including the development of a new evaluation procedure to embed
25 best-practice monitoring and evaluation across all levels of curriculum delivery.
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38 **Key words**
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41 internal evaluation, academic quality, student evaluations, capacity building, collaborative
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Introduction

This practice article describes a case of using collaborative evaluation for institutional improvement leading to continuous learning (Third Author, 2014) at [name of university], a regional university located in Toowoomba, Australia.

Australian universities are required by law to monitor and evaluate their academic activities based on student feedback (see *Higher Education Standards Framework (Threshold Standards) 2021* (Cth), s. 5.3.5). For the sake of both students and academic staff, however, it is incumbent on universities to use any student feedback in an ethical and appropriate manner. As Kitto et al. (2019) note, “it is essential that decision makers and evaluators make use of best practice methods to analyse the data that [student evaluations of teaching] generate” (p. 339). At [name of university] student evaluations are used as a sentinel indicator to stimulate an improvement conversation at the mid-semester point with key academic stakeholders. The concept of the sentinel indicator is borrowed from ecology in which certain species are considered “sentinel” species because they provide an early warning of issues within the ecosystem. The university views learning and teaching as a complex ecosystem in which student evaluations data *are but one feature*. This approach is supported by the widespread agreement in the literature that universities should ensure student evaluations are simply one facet of a comprehensive evaluation framework (e.g., Abrami et al., 2007; Third Author et al., 2012; Marsh, 2007). “Course enhancement conversations”¹ are held at the university for courses displaying the sentinel indicator and provide the impetus for an in-depth examination of the learning and teaching ecosystem. Conversations are an opportunity for collaborative learning and capacity building for academic staff stakeholders through the adoption of a holistic view of student evaluations, which are considered within the full ecosystem of extensive quantitative and qualitative course and survey data.

Before describing the development and implementation of the course enhancement conversation process in detail, we first contextualise the process by briefly discussing broader improvements at the institution which were required by the Australian higher education regulator. Within this context, the course enhancement conversations can be understood as an intervention to improve both curriculum and evaluation practice. We then discuss collaborative approaches to evaluation, and why adopting such an approach was appropriate in the context of the institution’s

¹ Note the term “course” is used at [name of university] to refer to an “accredited unit” as defined by the *Australian Qualifications Framework* (2013).

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3 broader improvement agenda. We position the course enhancement conversations as a collaborative
4 mechanism to respond to student feedback data in a way which supports academic staff and builds
5 their capacity to make data-informed decisions on improving course quality.
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9 **Regulatory context and background**

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12 The development of a larger evaluation framework has been the focus of a sustained program of
13 work at the university. The university's *Academic Quality Framework* (Third Author, 2019a) was
14 devised in direct response to a significant external driver for change. In 2018, the registration of the
15 university as an "Australian University" under the *Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency*
16 *Act 2011* (Cth) was renewed on condition that (among other things) the Academic Board (the
17 university's academic governance body) demonstrates that it regularly receives comprehensive
18 diagnostic analysis for each higher education program the university offers (TEQSA, 2018). To
19 address the requirements of the conditional re-registration, the university commissioned work to
20 develop a new quality assurance framework for academic activities—one that would facilitate
21 stronger academic governance and allow evidence-informed strategic decision-making on the
22 university's courses, programs, and the student experience. The original concept for the *Academic*
23 *Quality Framework*, subsequent rollout, and tracking of progress over time were captured in a series
24 of reports that were endorsed by the university's Academic Board to ensure thorough and transparent
25 academic governance of activities under the framework (Third Author, 2019b; Third Author, 2019c;
26 [name of university], 2021).
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40 It was noted in the Statement of Reasons for the university's re-registration condition that the
41 university's quality assurance framework has historically been undermined by a lack of sophisticated
42 data analysis (TEQSA, 2018). Thus, the requirement for comprehensive and systematic analysis of
43 data was addressed in a three-phase process (from proof of concept to implementation), supported by
44 several inter-dependent projects to improve the quality of the student experience. These projects
45 included a new assessment strategy, a curriculum model and program structures initiative, and an
46 academic governance project. A feature of the academic governance project was a recommendation
47 by an external consultant to "establish a schedule of formal curriculum conversations at survey,
48 course, discipline, program, school, faculty, university reporting to Learning and Teaching
49 committee through the executive to Council" (Third Author, 2019a), including requirements that
50 academics engage in semester-based course reviews, formal curriculum conversations supported by
51 evidence-based reports, and the documentation of all curriculum conversations. This
52 recommendation was based, in part, on concerns raised by academic staff that there was no standard
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3 for data presentation at the university, the data were being sourced *ad hoc*, and in some instances,
4 bespoke data repositories were being built to suit specific contextual needs (Third Author, 2019a).
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8 Additionally, the student feedback survey instrument at the university was radically revised in
9 2019 following an extensive literature review of 89 articles (2015-2019), a desktop audit of 41
10 Australian universities and 20 international universities (predominantly in the United States), and an
11 analysis of the usage and validity of the student survey questions and administration processes using
12 course data from 2016 to 2018 (Second Author, 2019). The review report included recommendations
13 that:
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- 19 • the survey length be drastically shortened to two questions, one on course satisfaction, and one
20 asking students to reflect on their own contributions to learning;
- 21 • a mandated mid-semester check-in survey be administered to facilitate improvements to courses
22 for the benefit of the current cohort;
- 23 • the survey be turned off for courses with 10 or fewer enrolments, in which case alternative
24 methods of evaluation should be used; and
- 25 • newly implemented school and faculty leadership and committee structures be leveraged to
26 oversee course monitoring and evaluation activities.
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34 This article focuses on the implementation of the last recommendation, namely the development of a
35 collaborative system in which schools and faculties worked with the central Academic Quality Unit
36 to consider student feedback survey data through the course enhancement conversations process.
37 This collaborative approach was seen as a fundamental feature of the university's quality framework,
38 as it spoke to the commitment to adopt a holistic approach to institutional academic data.
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44 **Championing evaluation through collaboration**

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47 When implementing new evaluation initiatives such as the course enhancement conversations, the
48 evaluation literature acknowledges the importance of “evaluation champions” in generating
49 momentum to change practice (Rogers & Gullickson, 2018). Effective evaluation champions “work
50 to bring evaluative thinking into their practice and positively promote evaluation among their
51 colleagues” (Rogers & Gullickson, 2018, p. 46). Championing the use of data to inform decision-
52 making on curriculum and course delivery was an important feature of the course enhancement
53 conversations, ensuring the university was addressing the issues raised by the regulator in its
54 conditional re-registration. As will be discussed further below, the early iterations of the
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3 conversations involved staff from the university's Academic Quality Unit in championing evaluation
4 practice and critical thinking about the available data. As Rogers et al. (2019b) conclude in relation
5 to internal evaluation within non-government organisations:
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9 NGOs that have an evaluation literate workforce, who use the most appropriate form of
10 evaluation at the right time and who are assisted by internal evaluators to enhance evaluative
11 thinking and critical reflection, have an increased likelihood of achieving the greatest social
12 impact. (p. 16)
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17 This resonates strongly with Patton's (2008) focus on the vital importance of the personal factor and
18 the "presence of an identifiable individual or group of people who personally care about the
19 evaluation and the findings it generates" (p. 66; see also Patton, 2012).
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23 The role of the Academic Quality Unit as evaluation champions working with academic staff
24 stakeholders also resonates with a collaborative approach to evaluation. Fetterman et al. (2018)
25 distinguish collaborative evaluation from other stakeholder involvement approaches such as
26 participatory or empowerment evaluation by considering the role of the evaluator. Within
27 collaborative evaluation, evaluators are "*in charge* of the evaluation" (Fetterman et al., 2018, p. 2,
28 emphasis in original) and stakeholders contribute to improving evaluation design and data collection
29 methods and analysis. This contrasts with participatory approaches, where evaluators share control
30 with stakeholders, and empowerment evaluation, where stakeholders are ultimately in control of the
31 evaluation (Fetterman et al., 2018). Collaborative evaluation is defined as "an approach in which
32 there is a substantial degree of collaboration between evaluators and stakeholders throughout the
33 process to the extent that they are capable of being involved" (Fetterman et al., 2018, pp. 10-11;
34 Rodríguez-Campos, 2012). A collaborative approach to evaluation is well-suited to developing
35 evaluation capacity in an organisation (Arnold, 2006). In addition to its appropriateness for capacity
36 building, adopting collaborative evaluation was also seen as an important step towards a more
37 constructive and holistic approach to student feedback, which has a fraught history in higher
38 education.
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52 **Student evaluations in higher education**

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55 We acknowledge the contentious nature of student evaluations within higher education. While the
56 student survey at [name of university] is a *course* feedback survey (not a teaching quality survey),
57 student evaluations more broadly may relate to course content and outcomes and/or teaching
58 practices (Heffernan, 2022). Regardless of their framing, student evaluations impact academic staff
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3 as important stakeholders in the process (Kitto et al., 2019). These impacts are more acutely and
4 adversely experienced by certain groups and within certain disciplines and subject areas (Heffernan,
5 2022). Concerns have been raised in the literature regarding the anonymous nature of student
6 evaluations and the impacts on the wellbeing of academic staff when feedback is not constructive or
7 is offensive (Lakeman et al., 2021). Student evaluations are therefore a high stakes activity on
8 multiple fronts: for academics in terms of career development, progression, and wellbeing (especially
9 when framed as evaluations of *teaching*), for students to have an avenue for raising genuine issues of
10 quality or to provide positive feedback, and for universities who have a regulatory requirement to
11 collect and respond to student feedback ethically and appropriately for all stakeholders.
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20 We present collaborative evaluation through course enhancement conversations as one way to
21 use this sensitive data objectively and constructively to give academics the agency to make evidence-
22 based decisions about courses. We liken this approach to a “data as partners” scenario, in which the
23 data (of which student feedback data is only one component) provide an opportunity for reflection
24 and learning. In doing so, we seek to take much of the emotion out of the consideration of student
25 feedback by viewing it as but one facet of a larger data ecosystem. We develop the view of course
26 enhancement conversations as a collaborative learning environment further below (see “Facilitating
27 the conversations”). Conversations consider hundreds of lines of course and student survey data
28 during a qualitative conversation, and this represents a significant resource investment by the
29 university in improving the student experience. This investment demonstrates the depth of the
30 university’s commitment to improving practice and academic quality for the benefit of all
31 stakeholders, including students, academic and professional staff, university executive, and the
32 regulator alike.
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43 The remainder of this practice article traces the evolution of internal collaborative evaluation
44 practice in the form of course enhancement conversations, from development to implementation and
45 finally towards the embedding of sustainable practice.
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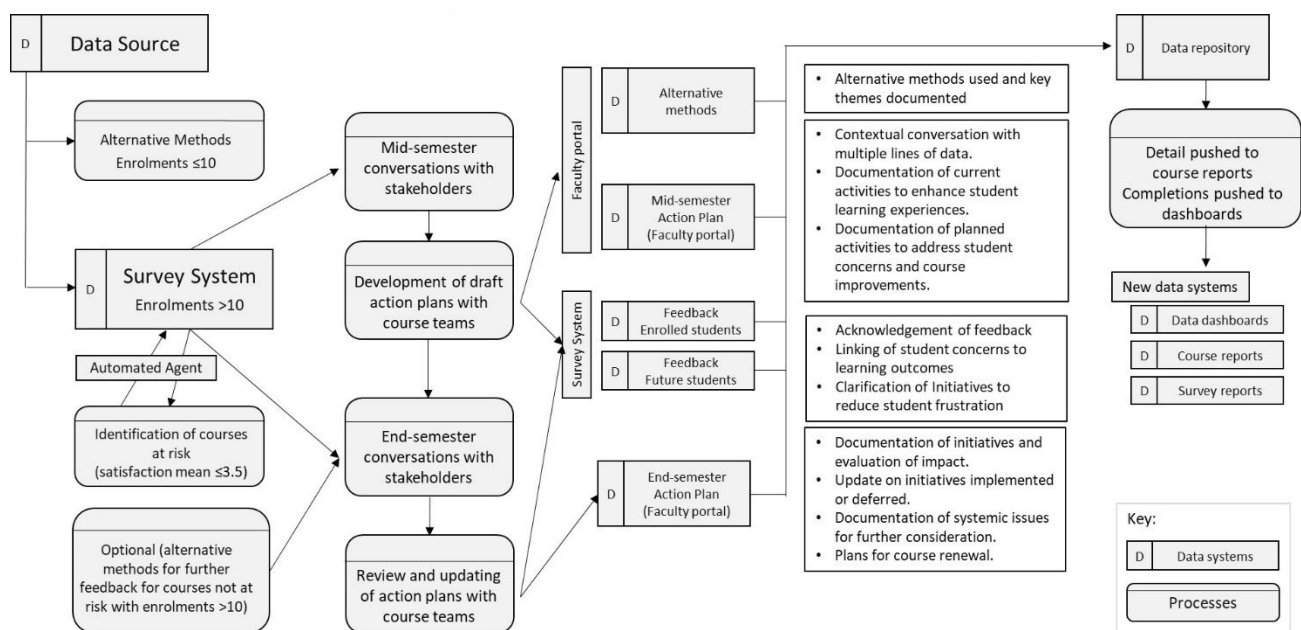
50 **Development of the course enhancement conversation process**

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52 The following sections outline the evolution of the course enhancement conversations process. This
53 detail has been provided to assist other higher education institutions who may be considering
54 alternative approaches to the use of student evaluations of course quality.
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Figure 1 presents the workflow diagram developed to support the integration of current and new data systems (denoted “D”) with the new processes required for the launch of the university-wide pilot of course enhancement conversations in semester one, 2020 (after a limited pilot in semester three, 2019). In addition to the collaborative evaluation framework established to conduct the conversations, significant technology resources were required to provide access to current data previously not available to course teams and ensure academic activities in response to data-driven conversations were being systematically captured and monitored.

Figure 1

Course Enhancement Conversations University-Wide Pilot Semester one, 2020



Survey and course reports

All staff across the university including course teams and relevant stakeholders received access to accurate, current, and relevant data on course consumption and enrolment trends as well as student progress. In addition, a specialised suite of course and survey reports ([name of university], 2019a and 2019b) were developed to provide access to current and historic student feedback. Restricted access to these reports was granted to current course teams, delegated support staff and delegated management staff. Significant investment was made in capacity building for all staff in reading, interpreting, and using the data contained in the automated cohort-based reports to inform decisions on curriculum. A total of 176 capacity building workshops were held with 2,090 attendees from across the university to support the implementation of the *Academic Quality Framework*. These course and survey reports capture extensive data that reflects contemporary practice and key performance indicators to meet academic quality imperatives.

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3 The student survey instrument for the university's *Academic Quality Framework* is comprised
4 of two questions on a Likert scale (1=Strongly Disagree; 2=Disagree; 3=Neither agree nor disagree;
5 4=Agree; 5= Strongly Agree):
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- 8
9 1. I am satisfied with this course so far (mid-semester) OR Overall I am satisfied with this
10 course (end-semester)
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- 12 2. I have taken advantage of the learning opportunities offered in this course so far (mid-
13 semester) OR I have taken advantage of the learning opportunities offered in this course
14 (end-semester)
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19 Student responses to item 1 are calculated as a sentinel indicator of course quality. As discussed
20 above, the sentinel indicator is but one data point within a complex learning and teaching ecosystem.
21 For the student survey, an average score of 3.5/5.0 or less on the Likert scale 1-5 was determined to
22 be an appropriate sentinel indicator requiring further investigation. The average score of 3.5/5.0 was
23 identified by members of the academic executive as an appropriate testing point and one that could
24 be sufficiently resourced in terms of holding course enhancement conversations.
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31 The use of a sentinel indicator as opposed to a *performance* indicator is fundamental to the
32 intent and spirit of the *Academic Quality Framework*, namely, that all data points must be
33 contextualised within a broader set of course data to enable fair and meaningful discussion of
34 possible actions in response. Sentinel indicators make no final evaluative determination. Rather, they
35 are an indicator that further investigation into course context is required to determine whether a
36 genuine risk to quality exists. For the student survey, an average score of 3.5/5.0 or less on the Likert
37 scale 1-5 was determined to be an appropriate sentinel indicator requiring further investigation. The
38 average score of 3.5/5.0 was identified by members of the academic executive as an appropriate
39 testing point and one that could be sufficiently resourced in terms of holding course enhancement
40 conversations.
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49 Average scores within course surveys and comparisons of average scores across courses,
50 disciplines or organisational units become meaningless when undertaken devoid of course context
51 (Kitto et al., 2019). This foregrounding of course context as part of the evaluation activity—that is,
52 making the background context for the student evaluations explicit (Rog, 2012)—is a fundamental
53 feature of the course enhancement conversations. Course reports provide such comprehensive and
54 detailed data (over 700 lines of evidence) on enrolment trends, students carrying penalties, cohort
55 outcomes (pre-census withdrawal and progression and failure rates for 13 sub-cohorts), grade
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3 distribution, assessment tasks (including pass and fail rates), teaching team, and summaries of past
4 student feedback. These course reports provide the essential context for meaningful discussion of
5 student feedback during course enhancement conversations.
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8 9 10 **Implementation of the course enhancement conversations**

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12 A small-scale pilot of course enhancement conversations at mid and end semester three in 2019
13 involved all 68 courses offered in five schools and two faculties. This meant conversations were held
14 with every course team to test the hypothesis that the sentinel indicator was appropriate. As a result,
15 it was established that an average overall satisfaction score of less than 3.5/5.0 was a sound sentinel
16 indicator of concern regarding the quality of the student experience ([name of university], 2021) to
17 trigger a course enhancement conversation. The next phase was a university-wide pilot of mid and
18 end of semester course enhancement conversations during semester one, 2020 (Figure 1).
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26 In response to stakeholder feedback during these early iterations, several changes were made to
27 the course enhancement conversations process. First, staff feedback indicated there should be a
28 requirement for five or more responses to the student survey for a conversation to occur where the
29 sentinel indicator resulted. Second, the presentation of survey reports was changed from a traffic
30 light theme (green, red, and amber) to shades of blue, which was more in keeping with the use of a
31 sentinel indicator and the non-judgmental spirit of the course enhancement conversations. Third,
32 during the 2020 semester one pilot, the Academic Quality Unit facilitated both mid and end of
33 semester conversations. After holding approximately four end-of-semester conversations, this
34 activity was quickly shut down, as it became apparent that conversations were moving into the
35 territory of academic staff performance, which was beyond the remit of the course enhancement
36 conversations. Further, end-of-semester conversations were necessarily held prior to grades
37 finalisation, which meant a vital piece of contextual data could not be made available to participants.
38 In consultation with schools and faculties, the Academic Quality Unit continued to facilitate mid-
39 semester course enhancement conversations, but for the foregoing reasons, the end of semester
40 conversations became the sole responsibility of schools and faculties. This shift also began the
41 transitional process of embedding monitoring and evaluation practice more deeply into the business-
42 as-usual practice of the facilities and schools. Finally, in response to staff feedback, a *Course*
43 *Enhancement Conversation Protocol* was developed in 2020 by the Academic Quality Unit
44 collaboratively with one of the school associate heads of learning and teaching. This protocol
45 remains an important touchstone for the process. The early pilots resulted in a validation of the
46 sentinel indicator where there were five or more responses and there was agreement between the
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3 course team that quality was at risk. These ongoing improvements to business rules and processes
4 reflect the iterative nature of Deming's (1986) continuous improvement cycle of *plan, do, act, check*.
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8 During the most recent course enhancement conversations for semesters one, two and three of
9 2021, 78 courses (out of a total of 739 or 10% of eligible courses across the year) were involved in
10 mid-semester conversations. These conversations with course teams were facilitated by the
11 Academic Quality Unit for courses displaying the sentinel indicator of 3.5/5.0 or less, with five or
12 more respondents in courses with 11 or more enrolments (courses with enrolments of 10 or fewer
13 were excluded). Of the 78 courses, 16 of these were determined to be false flags where the course
14 team agreed that considering other contextual factors and course and survey data, the sentinel
15 indicator was not validated. Considerable resources were allocated to this activity by the university
16 to recognise the importance of improving practice in response to student feedback—approximately
17 200 hours of staff time was spent in conversations involving some 271 staff. The university considers
18 this allocation of resources as a worthwhile capacity building activity with a central focus on
19 improving the quality of the student learning experience.
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29 **Facilitating the conversations**

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32 The mid-semester course enhancement conversations have generally been facilitated by the
33 Academic Quality Unit, with the aim of handing over facilitation in future to school associate heads
34 of learning and teaching once capacity has been built.
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39 The first author was seconded to the Academic Quality Unit for 2021 from a school-based role
40 as the associate head of learning and teaching. A feature of the conversations is that the facilitator
41 comes from an academic rather than administrative background. This not only lends credibility to the
42 facilitation, but can also enhance relatability, particularly where the facilitator has been a course
43 convenor and had to respond to student feedback on their own courses. The first author brings
44 academic expertise in collaborative learning and social theories of learning to their evaluation
45 practice and facilitation (e.g., First Author, 2020; First Author, 2016). This background was ideally
46 suited to a collaborative approach to evaluation (Fetterman et al., 2018; Rodríguez-Campos, 2012),
47 particularly in consideration of power within the evaluation team. While the evaluator is “in charge”
48 of the evaluation in collaborative approaches, the goal is to foster and strengthen evaluation practice
49 (Fetterman et al., 2017). This chimes with collaborative learning environments based on social
50 constructionism, in which the facilitator (or teacher) does not present as the sole holder of the
51 “authority of knowledge”. Rather, the group shares this authority and learns from their interactions
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3 with each other (Bruffee, 1998). Learning is approached as a shared goal and through joint problem
4 solving (Bruffee, 1998). The first author's expertise in collaborative learning was well-suited to the
5 constructive intent of the course enhancement conversations, as their focus was on gaining
6 contextual understanding of the course delivery rather than adjudicating teaching performance.
7
8 Fundamental to the success of this process was the facilitator's ability (as an outsider from a central
9 unit) to quickly establish credibility and rapport with course teams to maximise the learning that can
10 result from social interactions where everyone is focused on a shared goal or outcome (First author,
11 2022). This collaborative and constructive approach was clearly communicated at the start of each
12 conversation to put participants at ease and emphasise that the catalyst for the conversation was a
13 sentinel, not a *performance*, indicator. The facilitator then outlined the format of the conversations.
14 Attendees included the facilitator and note taker from the Academic Quality Unit, the course
15 convenor and any other teaching staff, and the associate head of learning and teaching from the
16 relevant school.
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27 All conversations follow a standard format. After introduction by the facilitator, the course
28 convenor provides some context for the conversation, including information on where the course sits
29 with program majors and programs, discussion of how the semester has commenced, the level of
30 student engagement, timing for the allocation of course convenorship, and development of course
31 resources. Then the facilitator steps participants through the course report, noting historical data on
32 withdrawal rates (pre and post census, identifying patterns in particular cohorts), progression rates
33 (referencing the government benchmark), issues regarding assessment (low pass rates for assessment
34 items, for example), and an overview of previous feedback and actions taken in response to improve
35 course quality. This foregrounding of context often raises important issues for discussion in relation
36 to the current round of student feedback, which is then considered via detailed examination of the
37 student survey report. Finally, the group discusses options for action to be taken in response to the
38 feedback and any support requirements. This information is captured in a course action plan written
39 by the course convenor after the conversation. The action plan is lodged in a central system for
40 record-keeping and accountability purposes. The course convenor closes the loop on feedback with
41 students via communications through the learning management system. After the course
42 enhancement conversations process is completed, monitoring of the implementation of action plans
43 becomes a school responsibility.
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3 The following vignette written by the first author describes an example of a course
4 enhancement conversation conducted at the mid-semester point during 2021, facilitated by the first
5 author on behalf of the Academic Quality Unit.
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9 *Vignette—Course enhancement conversation, semester two 2021*
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12 *My colleague (who will be taking notes) and I check-in with each other before admitting the*
13 *course team and associate head, learning and teaching into the Zoom meeting (we've been*
14 *meeting like this since semester one, 2020 due to the impacts of COVID19 on in-person*
15 *meetings): "Have you had a chance to read through the reports?" he asks.*
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21 *"Yes, some really interesting stuff in there. It will be good to hear from the course team about*
22 *how this first year course has been travelling this semester, given the big increase in*
23 *enrolments from last year. That could pose some challenges for the teaching team."*
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27 *"Yes, head count is up from 57 to 93—that's quite a jump," notes my colleague. "OK, let's*
28 *bring them in and see how it's been going."*
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32 *The course team and the school's associate head of learning and teaching join the Zoom. I*
33 *introduce myself and talk very briefly about my background as an academic and my*
34 *secondment to the Academic Quality Unit. This acts as an icebreaker to the conversation.*
35 *Throughout my facilitation of the conversations this year (and in my previous school role), I've*
36 *noticed many staff turn up to the conversations feeling (understandably) quite anxious until*
37 *they are reassured about the process. I always outline the purpose and intent of the*
38 *conversations, emphasising that the focus is squarely on the course and the contextual data,*
39 *and that we are here simply to do some further "digging" into the data. For this course, 17*
40 *students out of 93 have scored their satisfaction at 3.5/5.0—just on the edge of triggering a*
41 *conversation. I hand over to the course convenor who provides some context for the current*
42 *offer. We learn that the course has two streams, one focused on research and the other on*
43 *professional skills. The course convenor speculates that the jump in enrolments is most likely*
44 *because the course is now available online for the first time, enabling greater access for those*
45 *who may not be able to study on campus. This theory is supported by the course report data.*
46
47 *The cohort analysis shows a diverse cohort, with numerous students from low SES*
48 *backgrounds, five students with disabilities, and 37/97 students studying online. Several*
49 *students are carrying penalties from previous attempts at the course, and the course convenor*
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3 *explains that some students who are new to university tend to struggle with the research*
4 *stream.*
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8 *The convenor explains that the pre-census withdrawal rate is up (from 3% to 7%), but that*
9 *most of these students have been in touch explaining that they were withdrawing for personal*
10 *reasons. These students were thankful to the team and gave some positive feedback. There's a*
11 *particularly vocal cohort of mature-aged students who are driving the culture of the course,*
12 *and posts on the forum are being responded to promptly. The convenor notes that there have*
13 *been some issues, however, including the late change to a tutorial time (after the start of*
14 *semester) and course materials for the research stream not being available on time.*
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21 *We are then advised that the course team met prior to the conversation to go through all the*
22 *data from the course and survey reports and they have already discussed possible responses to*
23 *the student feedback. They agreed that the research stream needs more resources to support*
24 *students' learning and that principles of transition pedagogy need to be more fully embedded*
25 *into the course. As facilitator, I recommended that the course convenor record positive*
26 *feedback from withdrawing students in the course action plan and to close the loop with*
27 *students by posting on the forum that the feedback provided at the mid-point was taken*
28 *onboard by the teaching team and encouraging students to complete the end of semester*
29 *survey.*
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38 *I checked in with the course at the end of semester. The student survey response rate had*
39 *increased from 18% to 25%, and the overall satisfaction with the course improved from 3.5/5.0*
40 *at mid semester to 4.4/5.0 by the semester's end. The course and survey report dashboards*
41 *also indicated that the course team had written a course action plan at both points of the*
42 *semester and recorded this plan in the system for future reference and quality assurance*
43 *purposes.*
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50 This vignette demonstrates the positive outcomes for staff and students that can be achieved
51 when the sentinel indicator is considered within the broader course context and is approached as
52 being “non-judgmental” in and of itself. The vignette is based on an actual case and admittedly
53 presents a “best-case scenario” for course enhancement conversations—mainly due to the excellent
54 engagement of the course team in the process through their openness to student feedback, their
55 careful consideration of the course and survey data, and their collaborative approach to formulating a
56 response. The course team in this case was highly engaged and pro-active and used the course
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3 enhancement conversation to not only unearth important contextual information to resolve issues
4 raised by students, but to record the positives about the course's delivery. The overall result was an
5 improved student experience for the cohort in question, and improvements to course delivery that
6 will inform and enhance future course offers.
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10 **Concluding reflection: Creating an evaluation culture through collaboration**

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14 Reflecting at the institutional level, the development of the course enhancement conversations is an
15 example of organisational *improvement*, one of the four academic quality elements in Third Author's
16 *Continuous Learning Framework* (2014) (see this special issue), which also includes *accountability*,
17 *performance*, and *investment*. The continuous learning framework can be used by internal evaluators
18 to guide stakeholders towards evidence-based strategic decision-making with the goal for them to
19 become a continuous learning organisation. Deming's (1986) quality improvement cycle of *plan, do,*
20 *act, check* operates through each academic quality element. At the level of course enhancement
21 conversations, Deming's cycle allowed for iterative development and refinement of the process
22 based on pilots and stakeholder feedback.
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31 One of the primary objectives of adopting a collaborative approach to evaluation through the
32 course enhancement conversations process was to champion evaluative thinking and build the
33 capacity of academic staff to make data-informed decisions on curriculum matters. As evaluation
34 champions, Academic Quality Unit staff modelled evaluative thinking for academic staff
35 stakeholders, providing the "personal factor" which Patton (2008) identifies as being so important to
36 success in evaluation activities. While Academic Quality Unit staff have generally facilitated the
37 conversations to date, the intention is for school associate heads of learning and teaching to take over
38 facilitation. This handover process is ongoing. Some associate heads have been facilitating since
39 early iterations of conversations; others who may be newer to the role are still building their
40 confidence to do so. The role of data champion, however, is gradually being taken up by these school
41 leaders.
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51 Academic staff are the primary intended users of the evaluation findings from course
52 enhancement conversations and are clearly best positioned to use these findings to effect change and
53 improve practice at the course level. Adopting a collaborative approach places stakeholders front and
54 centre in the evaluation activity, and directly affects use of evaluation findings, with evaluation
55 participants more likely to use (Johnson et al., 2009; Maloney, 2019). In their review on evaluation
56 use, Johnson et al. (2009, p. 377) found that "engagement, interaction, and communication between
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3 evaluation clients and evaluators is critical to the meaningful use of evaluations”. Anecdotally, many
4 academic staff have commented on how much better equipped they are to use data to inform
5 decision-making on curriculum matters because of participating in the course enhancement
6 conversations. The impact of the course enhancement conversations process on academic learning
7 and teaching practices at the university is the subject of ongoing monitoring and future evaluation.
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13 The strategic use of collaborative evaluation and collaborative learning enabled a democratic
14 “bottom up” rather than “top down” approach to course evaluation. This in turn has created a new
15 culture of evaluative thinking within academic staff to use evidence to improve the student
16 experience. 2The university’s Academic Board recently approved the new *Course Quality*
17 *Assurance—Evaluation Procedure* signalling a new era for curriculum quality assurance at the
18 university. The procedure captures the course-level practices outlined in this article, which evolved
19 over a period of three years from 2019-2022. It also extends these practices to the major, program,
20 and university level. The new procedure evidences the university’s commitment to an evidence-
21 based approach to curriculum quality assurance to deliver a high-quality learning experience for
22 students. It is also the result of a whole-of-institution collaborative effort to consider academic
23 quality data (including student feedback) contextually and constructively, which has positively
24 contributed to [name of university]’s evolution as an organisation dedicated to continuous learning.
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34 **Acknowledgements**

35
36
37 The authors wish to acknowledge Professor [insert name], Provost, [insert name of university], as
38 sponsor of this special issue. The authors thank [insert name] for her assistance in copy editing this
39 article.
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