

# A Culture of Feedback: Staff – Students – Peers

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# ▶ Introduction



Among Maynooth University's strategic priorities is an aim:

*'To further develop and refine our approach to gathering student feedback and information on the effectiveness of teaching, informed by the best available evidence, with the goal of better supporting departments in enhancing teaching and learning.'*

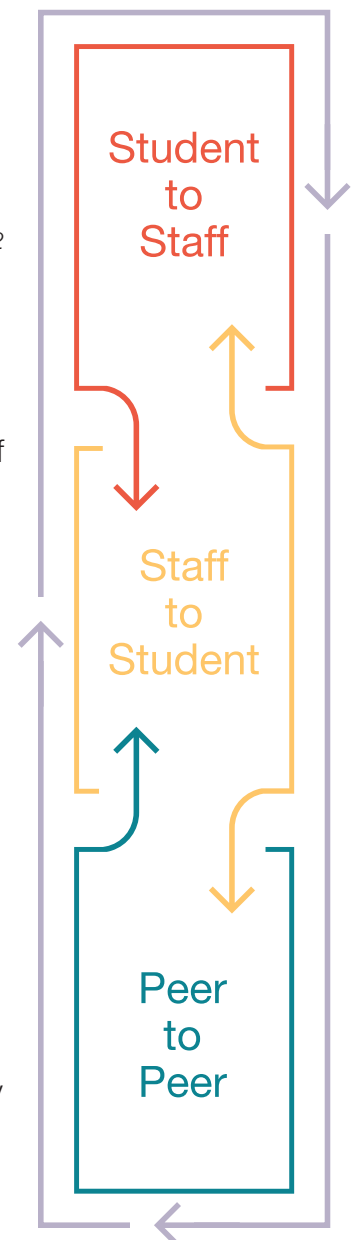
~ Maynooth University Strategic Plan 2018-22

The Department of Applied Social Studies (DAPPSS), offers three flagship Master of Social Science postgraduate programmes – in **Social Work**; in **Rights and Social Policy**; and in **Community and Youth Work** – in addition to doctoral, undergraduate and conversion programmes. An emphasis across all of these programmes on community and participation underpins the mission and commitment of the Department:

*'To promote human rights, social justice and equality, nationally and internationally, through excellence and innovation in education, research and public engagement that contribute to the development of the social professions and applied social sciences.'*

In practice, this means we are committed to promoting and supporting participative student learning; thus feedback and evaluation are part of this process. DAPPSS uses a wide range of mechanisms to create the conditions for this. Our programmes span from academic, to professional, including professional fieldwork placements and return-to-education and community learning. In addition, our staff work in partnership with University offices and organisations in the community to pioneer programmes that enhance community engagement with the University and support access to the University from sections of society that are less represented. This broad remit places an onus on us to engage creatively with diverse student groups who are participating in fundamentally different learning experiences.

## A Culture of Feedback



# ▶ A Plan to Gather 3-Level Feedback

The Department has undergone a notable expansion in recent years in terms of student numbers, the size and research interests of the staff team, and the range of programmes. In addition to academic learning, students attending courses in the Department engage in learning on placement, and experiential learning forms key components of both our academic and professional programmes. In the context of these changes, the department was eager to explore programme team approaches to student feedback, to better understand the student experience and to enhance teaching and learning across programmes. In addition, the required institutional common module evaluation questionnaire did not address the diverse components of our programmes and we sought to find programme specific approaches to student feedback to address this challenge. Evaluation and feedback are of keen interest to us, and we are eager to employ our experience in both quantitative, qualitative and evaluative methodologies to contribute to this University-wide initiative on learning through feedback and evaluation. As a Department committed to the highest standards of teaching and learning, external examination of teaching is invited, and we have Programme Consultative and Advisory Groups on a number of programmes. We are also eager to develop and contribute to enhanced teaching and learning through evaluation which draws on student feedback and uses it to inform our practices going forward.

The core team for this initiative involved the Programme Coordinators from the Department's flagship MSocSc programmes in Social Work; Rights and Social Policy; and Community and Youth Work. The aim was to initiate a three-programme collaboration on this initiative in order to promote a cross-departmental culture of feedback and to develop student feedback approaches that suited each particular Master's programme. The pilot adapted a holistic approach to student feedback and evaluation of teaching – drawing on student feedback as a basis for developing team approaches to student feedback and using this to reflect on and inform teaching practices going forward.

**Figure 1: Our Approach to Developing A Culture of Feedback**

<b>1 Peer-to-Peer Feedback</b>	<b>2 Student-to-Staff Feedback</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>1.1</b> To build 'giving and receiving feedback' skill development into modules.</li> <li><b>1.2</b> Embed peer-to-peer feedback in modules.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>2.1</b> Build relationships with the students that foster engagement with feedback.</li> <li><b>2.2</b> Create meaningful spaces where students can deliver honest and reflective feedback on modules and programmes.</li> <li><b>2.3</b> Gather and use meaningful feedback to enhance teaching.</li> <li><b>2.4</b> Going forward, develop and maintain opportunities for student partnership in feedback structures.</li> </ul>
<b>3 Staff-to-Student Feedback</b>	<b>4 A Culture of Feedback</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>3.1</b> Explore student perceptions of what characterises 'quality feedback' on academic work.</li> <li><b>3.2</b> Establish a practice of providing regular assessment feedback from staff to students on academic work.</li> <li><b>3.3</b> Develop standardised mechanism for and minimum quality of feedback to students on academic work.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><b>4.1</b> Build relationships across the three programme teams.</li> <li><b>4.2</b> Empirically measure the success of initiatives.</li> <li><b>4.3</b> Plan next steps for enhancing this culture including: auditing feedback practices and sharing findings.</li> </ul>

To achieve this we developed and trialled a range of feedback approaches across the Department's three diverse Masters programmes at three levels; student-to-staff, staff-to-student and peer-to-peer. These approaches would, in concert with existing feedback practices, contribute to enhancing and promoting the existing culture of feedback in the Department. We also evaluated how staff and students perceived these practices. By developing each of these levels of feedback, whose characteristics are outlined in Figure 1 above, by considering feedback practice across the department more broadly, and by gaining independent evaluation of our pilot activities, we identified factors necessary for maintaining and enhancing a culture of feedback in our Department.

Having established that 3-levels of feedback were necessary to an enhanced culture of feedback – peer-to-peer, student-to-staff, and staff-to-student – the programme coordinators worked together to critically appraise models of pedagogy with the aim of identifying potential approaches for use. From this, the team devised a 'tool-box' of feedback and evaluation approaches – tried and tested in this initiative – that can be adopted by colleagues across the Department, and adapted as appropriate in their specific teaching contexts. More generally, the opportunity to work collaboratively across three diverse programmes allowed the programme coordinators to identify, discuss, share and adopt useful practices, and therefore contribute to enhancing feedback and teaching across the Department.

The tables below outline the tool-box of approaches that were trialled within the project for each level of feedback. Each table includes details about the activities involved, the associated pedagogical models, the outcomes of the activities, and the Team's reflections on their use. The tables also contain quotations from the report produced by an independent consultant (see below) who evaluated the pilot activities.

This table outlines approaches trialled to help develop students' skills in giving and receiving feedback.

Table 1: Peer-to-Peer Feedback Activities			
Pilot Activity	Description	Evaluation Outcomes and Closing the Loop	Impact, Reflections and Recommendations
<p><b>1.1 Peer-to-Peer Feedback:</b></p> <p>Building 'giving and receiving feedback' skill development into modules.</p>	<p><b>Pedagogical model of 'giving and receiving feedback' skill:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>At the start of semester 1, the concept of 'feedback' was introduced in class, and contextualised, with subject/profession specific teaching and learning literature shared.</li> <li>Conditions for skill development were created: (i) students first modelled methods of feedback during in class activities and then later (ii) practiced giving and receiving feedback with each other.</li> <li>This practice was layered over a period of weeks.</li> <li>Opportunities were then created for students to analyse feedback and develop plans to respond to feedback.</li> </ul>	<p>The Consultant Report showed that students really valued the structured interventions in the peer feedback element (and particularly learning to receive feedback from their peers).</p> <p>The students noted that it was helpful to have dedicated time earmarked for this activity. Provision of different techniques, a language and frameworks for the provision of feedback was considered useful.</p> <p><i>'Both giving constructive feedback and receiving and processing feedback (without taking offense or being oversensitive) got easier with practice ('I was less afraid', 'I was more openminded and accepting'). The process of deliberately looking for feedback was very useful.'</i> ~ Report Extract</p> <p><i>'Students valued the space to consider the importance of feedback.'</i> ~ Report Extract</p> <p>Students also indicated the value of this learning for receiving feedback from staff.</p> <p><i>'The challenge in receiving feedback is to move away from focusing on the negative and instead appreciate the honesty and take it more positively.'</i> ~ Report Extract</p>	<p>Balancing time remains an issue to be resolved, while there were mixed opinions about having a dedicated feedback skills module.</p> <p><i>'There was not always enough time – the feedback sessions were always a bit rushed at the end.'</i> ~ Report Extract</p> <p><i>'It would have been useful to have more guidance on different styles of feedback earlier in the process.'</i> ~ Report Extract</p>
<p><b>1.2 Peer-to-Peer Feedback:</b></p> <p>Peer-to-peer feedback was embedded into modules, programmes, and across programmes.</p>	<p><b>Practices used for embedding peer-to-peer feedback:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Multiple spaces were created for students to give feedback to each other across programmes e.g. pitching of research proposals, peer-review of written work.</li> <li>Students often worked in pairs or small groups.</li> <li>This was layered throughout the programmes, evolving from informal to formal feedback as skills developed.</li> </ul>	<p>Students clearly gained from the focus on feedback at both a personal and professional level, in terms of confidence to give feedback and receive feedback (particularly peer-to-peer-feedback), and the peer-to-peer feedback also served to support students to get to know one another better.</p> <p><i>'Group participants reported that interaction provided a collegiate feel which was useful given the [programme was largely delivered online this year due to Covid and] the group only had a few lectures together.'</i> ~ Report Extract</p>	<p><i>'It was noted that this could benefit from being more structured, perhaps through the use of icebreakers.'</i> ~ Report Extract</p> <p>Staff identified these activities as important for skill development for future work environments and professional practice.</p>

This table outlines student-to-staff approaches trialled to help build good relationships between students and staff, assist students to develop their feedback skills, and contribute to the evaluation and enhancement of teaching.

**Table 2: Student-to-Staff Feedback Activities**

Pilot Activity	Description	Evaluation Outcomes and Closing the Loop	Impact, Reflections and Recommendations
<p><b>2.1 Student-to-Staff Feedback:</b></p> <p>Build relationships with the students that create conditions for engagement and honest reflective feedback.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Each Master's programme has a <b>designated programme coordinator</b>, an academic staff member responsible for the academic administration of the programme as well as teaching on the programme and supporting the students in their pastoral needs. The coordinators are therefore centrally-placed to play a key role in facilitating Student-to-Staff Feedback.</li> <li>Each programme includes an <b>in-depth induction</b> to the University, department and programme. Through these activities, the coordinator builds strong relationships with the students and creates the conditions for engagement and honest reflective feedback.</li> <li>After the induction, as the programme progresses there are <b>routine informal check-ins</b> which afford students ongoing opportunities for programmatic feedback practices.</li> </ul>	<p><i>'The students spoke of valuing the safe space that was created.'</i> ~ Report Extract</p> <p><i>'The group believed and appreciated that they were genuinely being asked for their feedback and that it was wanted. They regarded this as very encouraging, in terms of creating an openness.'</i> ~ Report Extract</p> <p><i>'Group participants also reported feeling very comfortable emailing their coordinator with their feedback. Group participants appreciated having this option. "It is a good concept that does not exist in many other situations."'</i> ~ Report Extract</p>	<p>Regular informal check-ins with the class group supported staff-student relations and underlined the openness to feedback and engagement. This highlighted to students that their views were valued and that staff members wanted to ensure a continued culture of engagement.</p> <p>Other recommendations included:</p> <p><i>'Support more direct (non-anonymised) student to staff feedback.'</i> ~ Report Extract</p> <p><i>'Support and facilitate constructive self-reflection.'</i> ~ Report Extract</p>

**Table 2: Student-to-Staff Feedback Activities**

Pilot Activity	Description	Evaluation Outcomes and Closing the Loop	Impact, Reflections and Recommendations
<p><b>2.2a Student-to-Staff Feedback:</b></p> <p>Create meaningful spaces where students can deliver honest and reflective feedback at module or programme level.</p>	<p><b>Monthly Programme Feedback Check-ins</b></p> <p>MSocSc (Rights and Policy) runs in blocks and therefore only meets monthly. Each session commenced with a <i>programme feedback activity</i>:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>An online notice board was setup for students using Padlet enabling them to share feedback anonymously (see sample Padlet notice board in Appendix).</li> <li>Students were invited to post anonymously under varied headings – this tapped into what was going well, what was not, issues they would like to raise, useful learning tips to share.</li> <li>The Padlet was visible synchronously and items were discussed live allowing the Programme Coordinator to immediately respond to the issues raised.</li> </ul>	<p><i>‘Group participants reported appreciating the anonymity of Padlet as a way of providing student to staff feedback. They noted that this feedback could be completely free flowing and allowed them to say things more openly.’</i> ~ Report Extract</p> <p><i>‘The alternative evaluation at the end of the module only focused on specific questions, while Padlet was more open.’</i> ~ Report Extract</p>	<p>The volume of feedback via Padlet varied from session to session, sometimes taking longer to complete and at other times not yielding much feedback. A key learning point for staff to learn is the need to ‘read the room’ and move the conversation along.</p> <p>To enable more departmental staff to use Padlet, licences were bought for the three teams with in the department.</p>
<p><b>2.2b Continued:</b></p> <p>Create meaningful spaces where students can deliver honest and reflective feedback at module or programme level.</p>	<p><b>Timetabled Discussions</b></p> <p>In one programme students have regular, timetabled opportunities to discuss the programmes with course staff as a group and to make suggestions for revisions and innovations in relation to course content, teaching, methods and assessments, and the timing and organisation of different elements of the programmes.</p>	<p>These regular discursive spaces for student engagement with the running of the programme give voice to student partnership.</p>	<p>Creating space for discursive engagement on the programme is challenging in a busy schedule however, yields benefits in terms of engagement.</p>
<p><b>2.2c Continued:</b></p> <p>Create meaningful spaces where students can deliver honest and reflective feedback.</p>	<p><b>Reflective Feedback on Placement</b></p> <p>An established measure of students’ perceptions of learning on placement (designed by a cohort of students in 2015<sup>1</sup>) was administered to students returning from professional placement.</p>	<p>Use of this measure facilitated not only feedback on what worked for students on placement, but allowed for comparison with the feedback from earlier cohorts of students.</p> <p>The feedback now forms part of the programme accreditation pack for regulation purposes.</p> <p>Output from this exercise is shared with other students before going on placement.</p>	<p>The instrument, designed by students for students, has been successful in capturing what they believe works with respect to learning on placement.</p> <p>A matching practice teacher reflective survey has been designed for the next phase of placements.</p> <p>Sharing output from the exercise with the next cohort of students before they go on placement, helps to emphasise the department’s focus on incorporating students’ perspectives and on continual enhancement.</p>

<sup>1</sup> Flanagan, N., & Wilson, E. (2018). What makes a good placement? Findings of a social work student-to-student research study. *Social Work Education*, 37(5), 565-580; Wilson, E., & Flanagan, N. (2021). What tools facilitate learning on placement? Findings of a social work student-to-student research study. *Social Work Education*, 1-17.



**Table 2: Student-to-Staff Feedback Activities**

Pilot Activity	Description	Evaluation Outcomes and Closing the Loop	Impact, Reflections and Recommendations
<p><b>2.3a Student-to-Staff Feedback:</b></p> <p>Gather and use meaningful feedback to inform programme development.</p>	<p><b>Pre &amp; Post Knowledge &amp; Confidence Survey</b></p> <p>In order to evaluate growth in self-efficacy and feedback skills.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students completed a short base-line and matched post-programme survey assessing their level of knowledge and confidence in the subject matter and feedback skills.</li> <li>• A unique code allowed students to revisit their pre-programme self-efficacy at the end of the programme.</li> <li>• Results are formally analysed and appropriate adaptations to the programme are implemented.</li> </ul> <p>(a more detailed outline of this process can be found in Table 6 in the Appendix).</p>	<p>This brief survey affords staff an overview of areas where knowledge and confidence has grown or not. This can be revealing as it may or may not correlate with strengths demonstrated in assignments, as such it constitutes another way in which the tool-box activities can help to provide multifaceted viewpoints on teaching and learning matters.</p>	<p>This methodology (with adaptations) has been used for over five years and has proven informative.</p> <p>This is typically administered in person during class. In the current climate of online administration, response rates have been notably lower and it may not be possible to return before-programme surveys to students as this would undermine the anonymity of the approach.</p>
<p><b>2.3b Continued:</b></p> <p>Gather and use meaningful feedback to inform programme development.</p>	<p><b>End of Year Evaluation Survey Online</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A broad-based anonymous quantitative online survey was administered across programmes at the end of the 2019-20 academic year.</li> <li>• The survey addressed quality and depth of teaching, design, content, delivery, assignments, feedback-provision, student engagement, achievement and commitment, facilities and resources.</li> </ul>	<p>The survey which has been standardised across two programmes allows for a broad-based overview of issues relating to the programme that can then be used to think about and develop teaching.</p>	<p>Although informative with respect to broad issues and where the programme might be improved, and a useful sense of what the cohort as a whole thought, it missed the nuances about what worked unless student choose to volunteer this information.</p>
<p><b>2.3c Continued:</b></p> <p>Gather and use meaningful feedback to inform programme development (e.g. discursive feedback).</p>	<p><b>Discursive Module Feedback Session</b></p> <p>Students on one programme engaged in a detailed qualitative module feedback process as well as programme feedback.</p>	<p>As part of the end of programme evaluation students were invited to contribute to a discursive feedback session reflecting not only on the programme but their engagement and development therein.</p>	<p>Much of the final semester of the programmes are spent in finalising work and placements. The discursive feedback offered time to reflect on the entire programme and the students' journey through it.</p>
<p><b>2.4 Student-to-Staff Feedback:</b></p> <p>Gather and use meaningful feedback to inform programme development.</p>	<p>Going forward, develop and maintain opportunities for student partnership in feedback structures.</p>	<p>The success of the initiative underlines the importance of keeping efforts to engage with students fresh and live.</p>	<p>Keeping engagement fresh and live requires continuous evolution and development of the toolbox initiatives. This links strongly with Initiative Action 4.4.</p>

This table outlines staff-to-student feedback activities, these enabled staff to both develop their own assessment feedback approaches and model good feedback practice to students.

**Table 3: Staff-to-Student Feedback Activities**

Pilot Activity	Description	Evaluation Outcomes and Closing the Loop	Impact, Reflections and Recommendations
<p><b>3.1 Staff-to-Student Feedback:</b></p> <p>Explore student perceptions of what characterises 'quality feedback' on academic work.</p>	<p><b>Padlet Discussion on the nature of feedback</b></p> <p>A one-off Padlet-based discussion was initiated with students where students were invited to post anonymously under varied headings about their perception of what quality feedback should look like.</p>	<p>The exercise was useful for two opposing reasons. On the one hand, students could share what type of feedback they liked and didn't like, and on the other hand expectations of what feedback could actually be provided could be managed.</p>	<p>A useful exercise to undertake early in the year to facilitate sharing of expectations with staff and manage expectations of students.</p> <p>This facilitated the development of students' feedback literacy and enabled staff to examine their own assessment feedback practices and communicate with students about this.</p>
<p><b>3.2 Staff-to-Student Feedback:</b></p> <p>Establish an explicit practice of providing regular feedback from staff to students on academic work/summative assessment (e.g. Formal timetabling).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of Turnitin upload portals for all work was formalised across the department.</li> <li>• Submission dates for all assignments were included in programme calendars in handbooks at the beginning of the year.</li> <li>• An expected due date for feedback (ideally within 3 weeks) is negotiated with assessors.</li> </ul>	<p>Students value prompt written feedback and clearly state that this helps to give them a framework for learning and development.</p> <p>Using Turnitin assignment portals and feedback mechanisms allows programme coordinators to ensure that the assessment schedule and feedback schedule is implemented across the all of the modules in the programme.</p> <p><i>'Students agreed that they were provided with this feedback in a timely fashion and that the feedback provided was a lot more useful and constructive providing them with good direction.'</i></p> <p>~ Report Extract</p>	<p>While feedback across single modules has proven achievable. Managing feedback across 10 or more dissertation supervisors with different styles, preferences and different contractual arrangements with the department has proven to be a work in progress. Overall however, our work on this demonstrates our commitment to empower staff to develop and enhance their assessment practice.</p>
<p><b>3.3 Staff-to-Student Feedback:</b></p> <p>Develop standardised mechanism for, and minimum quality of feedback to students on academic work (formalise and disseminate feedback standards to staff).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A Standardised Departmental Assignment Feedback Sheet is included in all programme handbooks, allowing students to see the criteria used for evaluation of their work and prompting assessors to provide rubric as well as commentary feedback.</li> <li>• The above standardised feedback sheet has been incorporated into the Turnitin Feedback Studio.</li> <li>• A departmental guidance video was created and circulated to staff to demonstrate and encourage use of the Turnitin Feedback Studio and Rubric facilities.</li> </ul>	<p>Use of a standardised feedback sheet and rubric aimed to prompt a more standardised approach to feedback.</p> <p><i>'In many cases the usefulness and constructiveness of the feedback depended on the skills of those involved.'</i></p> <p>~ Report Extract</p> <p><i>'It would be good if all feedback was consistent in the level of detail it provided.'</i></p> <p>~ Report Extract</p>	<p>Providing a mechanism for standardised feedback goes some way toward encouraging staff to engage with a standardised system of feedback. However, as above, achieving this across different styles, preferences and different contractual arrangements with the department has proven to be a work in progress. This again emphasises the importance of ensuring that enhancement activities are context and disciplinary appropriate.</p>

This table details aspects that help to build ‘A Culture of Feedback’ including programmatic and cross-programme approaches to feedback and evaluation.

Table 4: A Culture of Feedback			
Pilot Activity	Description	Evaluation Outcomes and Closing the Loop	Impact, Reflections and Recommendations
<p><b>4.1 A Culture of Feedback:</b> Build relationships across the three programme teams (Project Team Meetings).</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The Project Team, comprised of the coordinators of the three Masters programmes, met regularly to discuss, explore, share, plan and collaborate on development of feedback practices and culture within the department. The frequency and duration of meetings varied depending on the task in hand. In the current year meetings were driven by the project and were generally task specific. However, the opportunity for engagement and learning was always availed of.</li> </ul>	<p>Drawing a project team from across the three disciplines of the department has yielded significant advantages with respect to sharing of learning and initiatives and whole-of-department collaboration on creating a culture of feedback.</p>	<p>Commonalities and learning opportunities arising from the cross-department team of Masters’ coordinators has underlined the value of fostering continued links across the three programmes. Collaborative teaching across the programmes has also evolved from this initiative and it is envisaged that this will continue.</p>
<p><b>4.2 A Culture of Feedback:</b> Empirically measure the success of initiatives.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>See Measuring success, Table 5 Appendix.</li> </ul>	<p>~</p>	<p>~</p>
<p><b>4.3 A Culture of Feedback:</b> Auditing feedback practices and sharing findings.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Plan next steps for enhancing this culture.</li> </ul>	<p>The work undertaken as part of this initiative has highlighted the value of sharing feedback practices.</p>	<p>To further this the team has secured ethical approval to conduct an audit of the Department’s feedback practices with a view to further sharing, discussing and disseminating practices.</p>

# ▶ Outcomes

One of the most valuable aspects of the initiative was the opportunity that it afforded the programme coordinators to work collaboratively across three diverse programmes and to identify, discuss, share and adopt practices that can contribute to the development of teaching in each programme and across the Department. These practices are summarised in Figure 2. They include practices related to all three aspects of feedback that the pilot explored, as well as methods for staff collaboration and reflection that enhanced the culture of feedback and evaluation across the Department.

**Figure 2: Feedback Practices**

## 1 Peer-to-Peer Feedback

- 1.1 Pedagogical model of 'giving & receiving feedback' skill development for professional programmes including literature pack.
- 1.2 Tool box of practices for embedding peer to peer feedback in modules.

## 2 Student-to-Staff Feedback

- 2.1 Model of routine informal engagement practices.
- 2.2 Create opportunities for meaningful feedback e.g. tool box of opportunities e.g. checkins, discussion, reflection or use of an online noticeboard, e.g. Padlet, for regular, live, anonymous feedback sessions.
- 2.3 Bespoke online surveys for programme/ placement evaluation and development.
- 2.4 Maintain a fresh 'always live' approach for new toolbox opportunities.

## 3 Staff-to-Student Feedback

- 3.1 Practice of annually exploring student perceptions of what characterises 'quality feedback' on academic work.
- 3.2 Explicit practice of providing regular feedback from staff to students on academic work stated in handbooks.
- 3.3 Strive for a standardised mechanism for, and minimum quality of feedback to students via Turnitin on academic work supported by staff training tools.

## 4 A Culture of Feedback

- 4.1 Established collaborative relationship across the three MSocSc programme teams.
- 4.2 Empirically measure success of initiatives.
- 4.3 Increased departmental awareness and sharing of feedback practices including audit of practices and promotion of feedback tools e.g. ethical approval to research department practices; purchase of Padlet licences for departmental teams.

# ► Measuring Success – Independent Evaluation of 3-Level Feedback Approaches

While the Project Team drew on their own observations and discussions to assess the success of their pilot activities, in order to get an independent perspective on initiative activities, they also employed an Independent Consultant who carried out semi-structured focus groups with students from each programme, as well as an exploratory interview with each of the three programme coordinators. Some of the findings of the focus group have been integrated in the tables above, more generally we can conclude that the exercise indicated that:

- Students appreciated they were given time to develop their own skills in giving and receiving feedback.
- That when students thought activities could be improved, they suggested specific potential solutions to perceived problems such as the introduction of icebreakers in the peer-to-peer feedback session.
- That students appreciated it when staff provided detailed and consistent feedback on academic work.
- That the evaluation exercise provided an excellent opportunity for staff to reflect on the initiative as a whole and the extent to which they achieved their objectives.

Taking part in this process also highlighted to students, the importance that the Department and Project Team placed on their feedback. The consultant's report noted that:

*'The group liked that their voice was important to the university.'*

This was an invaluable element in allowing the Project Team to evaluate their pilot activities. For reasons of cost and time it would not be possible to repeat a consultant-led review annually, however, it may be valuable to undertake an independent evaluation periodically, for example as part of a programme review cycle. The exercise also provided a further opportunity for students to learn about feedback, as they used the consultant's schedule of questions to conduct focus groups with their peers, and provided the Department Team with a report on their key findings in relation to the initiative activities. (An outline of the focus group process can be found in the appendix).

# ► Challenges and Next Steps

Creating a culture of feedback across the three disciplines of the Department and utilising the approaches outlined in the tool-box above, has yielded significant volumes of feedback from students. In many instances (e.g. live feedback sessions) every effort was made to respond to students' feedback concurrently through discussion or sharing knowledge. Where the issue could not be addressed immediately, the coordinator undertook to follow up via the appropriate mechanism, be that communicating issues to staff, or escalating the issue to the Head of Department or other appropriate Departmental forum.

The work was designed to create a suite of routine opportunities for students to communicate feedback so that students are not required to create ways to communicate feedback but are presented with opportunities. A culture of openness and value placed on feedback is crucial to a culture of feedback and the following quotes exemplify some of our initial success in this regard:

***'Group participants also reported feeling very comfortable emailing their coordinator with their feedback. Group participants appreciated having this option. "It is a good concept that does not exist in many other situations."***

~ Consultant Report Extract

***'The group liked that their voice was important to the university.'***

~ Consultant Report Extract

Notwithstanding these quotes, the Project Team is keenly aware that feedback is not a one-off event, rather it remains an ongoing process and therefore a work in progress. Feedback approaches must always be kept up to date and adapted to the specific contexts in which they are applied.

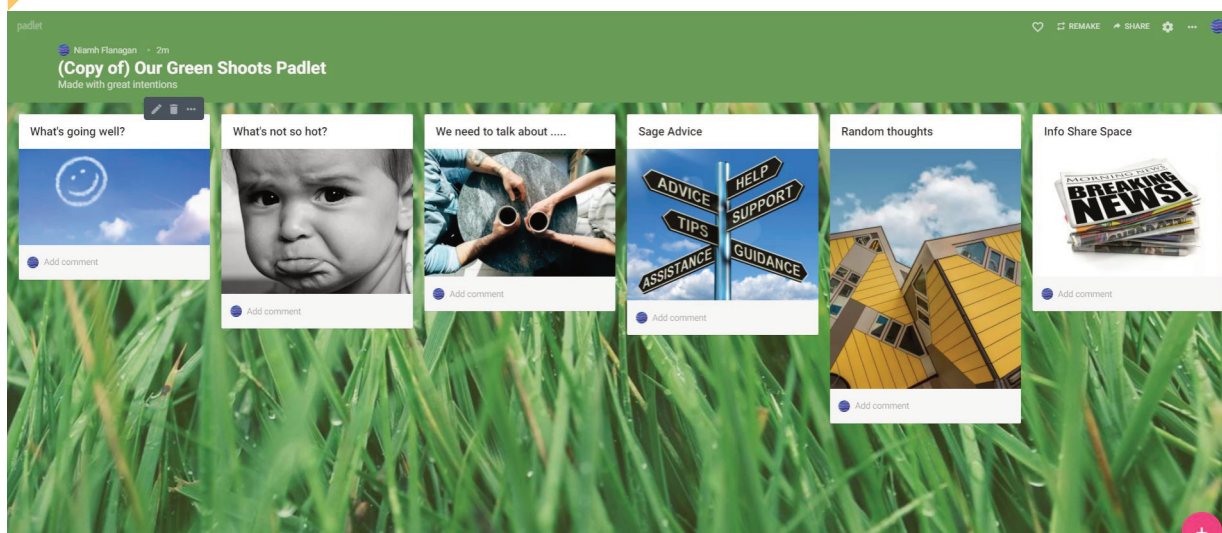
The Project Team outlined an ambitious programme for creating a culture of feedback. Many of the initiatives detailed in the Toolbox above have been implemented and embedded with a view to sustainability. The Team also have several future plans for further maintaining and enhancing a culture of feedback and evaluation including:

- Completion of reflective posters by students.
- Completing an audit of the feedback practices used across the department.
- Providing opportunities to develop and discuss the findings of this audit, and hosting a student-staff forum.

The Independent Consultant and student-led feedback reports provided an invaluable opportunity to press the pause button and reflect on progress. However, as noted above, the Project Team is more keenly aware of the need for sustained and innovative mechanisms for inviting feedback and displaying an openness to feedback.

The most significant challenge for the Project Team was undoubtedly the context of enforced online teaching and operation over the entire duration of the project. This impacted on opportunities to engage with students and develop relationships to underpin a culture of openness to feedback and hampered some activities which would typically take place in person. However, the truism “necessity is the mother of invention”, was never truer! Many initiatives, which might otherwise have been minor, were brought to the fore with unanticipated consequences. For example, regular informal check-ins before online classes with other lecturers became an important feature of a programme which did not have a typical weekday schedule. While this would have been time consuming and logistically challenging on campus, the facility to step in briefly but routinely before online classes was useful. Similarly, use of online tools such as Padlet, became more important than they might have been in an in-person context. However, each of these initiatives will be useful going forward.

### Example of Padlet used for Monthly Programme Feedback Check-in



# ► Impact and Reflections

This project grew from a desire to create a culture of feedback in the wider Maynooth University community. The Project Team's engagement with this process was a very useful opportunity to bring attention and focus to their ongoing practice in the various dimensions of feedback and afford them the opportunity to reflect and review how they can reinforce a culture of feedback in our Department. Working as a Departmental team, as well as engaging with colleagues from across the University, provided a forum for exchange and discussion of feedback ideas in addition to inspiring motivation and enthusiasm for feedback initiatives.

The necessity of an interrelated approach to feedback which spans the three levels of feedback – student-to-staff feedback, staff-to-student feedback and peer-to-peer feedback – became increasingly evident as the project progressed. Without an explicit culture of openness to feedback, opportunities for feedback are hampered. As teaching professionals, modelling quality feedback is essential, and, as educators, teaching feedback skills – both giving and receiving feedback – is a crucial aspect of professional practitioner education.

The work that has been undertaken is undoubtedly resource intensive. Some components, as outlined are not sustainable on a routine or annual basis e.g. engagement of an Independent Consultant. However, this is not to undermine the utility of such initiatives, but rather reinforce their periodic value.

As a three-discipline Department covering practitioner as well as policy professional education, this project offered an opportunity for cross-programme collaboration. The model of the Department's Masters programme coordinators working collaboratively has been an innovative and productive spark to cross-disciplinary activity, resulting, not only in knowledge sharing but also in cross-disciplinary teaching.

The Project Team have paralleled their project initiatives with research practices and associated ethical approval with a view to writing and publishing on their experiences and the experiences of their student partners. The key learning, that feedback is an ongoing and dialogic process that must be constantly supported and updated, reinforces the value of continued reflection and research on their culture of feedback.



# Appendix

## Measuring Success – Independent Consultant

Table 5 outlines the process used by the Independent Consultant, Dr Kathy Walsh, to evaluate the pilot activities (see Item 4.2 in the Toolbox).

Table 5				
Method	Description and Logic	Steps Involved in the Process	Assessment of Value	Sustainability
Independent Consultant-led focus groups with students.	To incorporate independent evaluation of the feedback initiatives developed as part of the project, an Independent Consultant (IC) was engaged to undertake focus groups.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Engage IC and undertake preliminary scoping discussions with IC.</li> <li>2 Exploratory interviews with each of the three programme coordinators to ascertain what feedback initiatives had been incorporated into various programmes.</li> <li>3 IC developed focus group schedule addressing student knowledge of, responses to, evaluation of and suggestions with regard to the feedback initiatives.</li> <li>4 Information and consent forms circulated to students and returned to the IC.</li> <li>5 IC undertook focus groups with groups of 8-10 students from each programme.</li> <li>6 Parallel student-led focus groups were undertaken by remaining class students.</li> <li>7 IC prepared a report outlining students' perceptions of the feedback initiatives.</li> </ol>	The IC's report afforded the project team an opportunity to garner an independent insight and overview of the feedback initiatives at a programme level.	This was an invaluable element of the project. However for reasons of time and cost, it is not something that would be repeated annually. However, there is a value in undertaking such an independent evaluation periodically. For example it might, perhaps be used as part of programme review cycles.

## Survey Methods

Table 6 details the method used for 2.3a module-level quantitative base-line and post-programme surveys to students to establish their subject knowledge and confidence and feedback. It also provides a mechanism through which students can evaluate teaching.

Table 6				
Method	Description and Logic	Steps Involved in the Process	Assessment of Value	Sustainability
Broad-based Standardised Quantitative end of programme surveys. (See Tool-box 2.3b)	In order to evaluate how broad characteristics of education have been received.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Students are asked to complete an anonymous online survey evaluating the self-efficacy, quality of teaching, facilities, learning, programme content etc.</li> <li>2 Results are formally analysed and discussed at staff meetings.</li> <li>3 Appropriate adaptations to the programme are implemented.</li> </ol>	Although broad-based these evaluations can highlight areas in need of change.	This is sustainable and affords an opportunity to compare programme to programme and year to year.

Table 7 details the standardised and broad-based quantitative end of programme surveys (2.4b), these can be employed for evaluation of teaching.

Table 7				
Method	Description and Logic	Steps Involved in the Process	Assessment of Value	Sustainability
Module-level quantitative base-line and post-programme surveys of knowledge and confidence. (See Tool-box 2.4a)	To evaluate how students' knowledge and confidence in the subject matter had changed over the course of the programme a brief before- and after-programme self-assessment survey was used.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1 Students create a unique ID number that only they could decode.</li> <li>2 Students completed a short questionnaire assessing their level of knowledge and confidence in the subject matter (including questions about feedback knowledge and confidence) at the start of the programme, submitting these for analysis.</li> <li>3 Students complete a short, matched, post-programme knowledge and confidence survey after the programme, submitting this for analysis.</li> <li>4 After completing the post-programme survey students will reclaim their pre-programme survey and compare how their knowledge and confidence has changed.</li> </ol>	This brief survey affords staff an overview of areas where knowledge and confidence has grown or not. This can be revealing as it may or may not correlate with assignments.	<p>This particular methodology has been used for some time and has proven informative.</p> <p>In the current climate of online teaching, it may not be possible to return before-programme surveys to students as this could undermine anonymity.</p>

# MSoc Knowledge and Confidence

Welcome to your MSoc (Rights & Social Policy) programme of study in the Department of Applied Social Studies, Maynooth University. Some of you may come to this programme with a lot of experience in this field of work, some with a little and for some of you this may be your first experience of learning about this career.

In order to help our ongoing planning for the programme to best meet the needs of students we would be very grateful if you would tell us about your previous education, experience, and confidence in this field.

In addition to this in-house evaluation, we would also like to share our learning via research journal articles and would like to include your feedback on the module in these articles.

Your feedback will be:

- Anonymous.
- Completely voluntary.
- Will have no impact on your programme of study.
- We will have no way of knowing who has consented/declined to participate and will not be able to withdraw data.
- Securely stored in Maynooth University.

Please tick the boxes below to indicate your understanding and consent. Tick all that apply.

- I understand my response will be used for evaluation purposes.
- I understand that my response is anonymous and cannot be linked back to me.
- I understand that it will not be possible to withdraw data once submitted.
- I give consent for my response to be used for research purposes as outlined above.

In order to return this form to you at the end of the programme, please create a **Unique Identifier (UI)** here.

Email this seven digit UI code to yourself to help you remember it.

Your mother's birthday (day/month)  /  Last three letters of your mother's maiden name

Please return this form by date specified.

### Thank you for your help

If you have any queries about this research/evaluation please feel free to contact Niamh Flanagan ([niamh.flanagan@mu.ie](mailto:niamh.flanagan@mu.ie)), Ciara Bradley ([ciara.bradley@mu.ie](mailto:ciara.bradley@mu.ie)) or Gloria Kirwan ([gloria.kirwan@mu.ie](mailto:gloria.kirwan@mu.ie)).

If, during your participation in this study, you feel the information and guidelines that you were given have been neglected or disregarded in any way, or if you are unhappy about the process, please contact the Secretary of the Maynooth University Ethics Committee at [research.ethics@nuim.ie](mailto:research.ethics@nuim.ie) or +353 (0)1 708 6019. Please be assured that your concerns will be dealt with in a sensitive manner.

It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent. This should not be a significant concern for this study as all data will be anonymous.

**Part A: Prior Education and Experience**

1 Please name any modules you have taken on social policy. Indicate the *institution type* (e.g. school, third-level, employment) in which you received this teaching.

Teaching on Social Policy	Institution Type
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2 Please describe in brief any social policy experience you have acquired. Indicate the *organisation type* (e.g. education, employment) in which you acquired this experience.

Experience	Organisation Type
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3 How aware would you say you are about national policies? *Please tick the answer which best describes your level of awareness.*

Level of Awareness	Unaware	Some Awareness	Aware	Very Aware
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4 How aware would you say you are about the policy making process? *Please tick the answer which best describes your level of awareness.*

Level of Awareness	Unaware	Some Awareness	Aware	Very Aware
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**Part B: Confidence in Policy Use**

5 Indicate how confident you feel at using national level policies relevant to your field of study for each of the following purposes. *Please tick the answer which best describes your level of confidence.*

**Cannot do at all    Not Very Confident    Moderately Confident    Certain that I can do**

Naming relevant policies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Discussing relevant policies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Critically analysing policies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Evaluating research / the evidence-base behind policies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Using policies to argue or advocate for change	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

6 Please indicate how confident you feel/would feel at engaging in the following policy activities.

Contributing information or evidence to inform policy development	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Contributing your opinions to inform policy development	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Making policy submissions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Taking feedback in order to improve your work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Providing constructive feedback to colleagues and other stakeholders	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

7 Please tell us briefly about an anxiety or fear you have with regard to this programme.

8 Please tell us briefly your main hope or expectation of this MSoc programme.

9 We welcome any comments you would like to add about the programme.

# MSoc Knowledge and Confidence

Thank you for your active participation in the MSoc (Rights & Social Policy) programme. As before, to help our ongoing planning for the programme to best meet the needs of students, we would be very grateful if you would give us some feedback on your experiences on the module.

We would like to share our learning about the module via research journal articles and would like to include your feedback in these articles. Your feedback will be anonymous, completely voluntary and will have no impact on your programme of study. We will have no way of knowing who has consented/declined to participate and will not be able to withdraw data.

Your feedback will be:

- Anonymous.
- Completely voluntary.
- Will have no impact on your programme of study.
- We will have no way of knowing who has consented/declined to participate and will not be able to withdraw data.
- Securely stored in Maynooth University.

Please tick the boxes below to indicate your understanding and consent. Tick all that apply.

- I understand my response will be used for evaluation purposes.
- I understand that my response is anonymous and cannot be linked back to me.
- I understand that it will not be possible to withdraw data once submitted.
- I give consent for my response to be used for research purposes as outlined above.

Your **Unique Identifier** code.

Your mother's birthday (day/month)   /   Last three letters of your mother's maiden name

Please return this form by date specified.

### Thank you for your help

If you have any queries about this research/evaluation please feel free to contact Niamh Flanagan ([niamh.flanagan@mu.ie](mailto:niamh.flanagan@mu.ie)), Ciara Bradley ([ciara.bradley@mu.ie](mailto:ciara.bradley@mu.ie)) or Gloria Kirwan ([gloria.kirwan@mu.ie](mailto:gloria.kirwan@mu.ie)).

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It must be recognised that, in some circumstances, confidentiality of research data and records may be overridden by courts in the event of litigation or in the course of investigation by lawful authority. In such circumstances the University will take all reasonable steps within law to ensure that confidentiality is maintained to the greatest possible extent. This should not be a significant concern for this study as all data will be anonymous.

**Part A: Elements of the MSoc Programme**

1 Please circle the number on the scale (1 = not at all useful, to 5 = very useful) which best reflects how useful you found the module elements.

a) Programme Lectures	1	2	3	4	5
b) PowerPoint slides in lectures	1	2	3	4	5
c) Assigned reading	1	2	3	4	5
d) Online resources (e.g. moodle)	1	2	3	4	5
e) Inputs by practitioners/working in the field	1	2	3	4	5
f) Opportunity to contribute in class	1	2	3	4	5
g) Others' contributions in class	1	2	3	4	5
h) Group work	1	2	3	4	5
i) Assignment	1	2	3	4	5

**Part B: The Overall Module**

2 Please circle the number on the scale (1 = not at all useful, to 5 = very useful) which best reflects how useful you found the module for the following purposes.

a) Increasing knowledge of the field	1	2	3	4	5
b) Increasing skills for working in the field	1	2	3	4	5
c) Increasing knowledge on policies	1	2	3	4	5
d) Increasing knowledge on practice	1	2	3	4	5
e) Improving writing skills	1	2	3	4	5
f) Improving presentation skills	1	2	3	4	5

**Part C: Policy Awareness**

3 How aware would you say you are about national social policies? Please tick the answer which best describes your level of awareness.

Level of Awareness	Unaware	Some Awareness	Aware	Very Aware
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4 How aware would you say you are about policy making procedures? Please tick the answer which best describes your level of awareness.

Level of Awareness	Unaware	Some Awareness	Aware	Very Aware
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**Part D: Confidence in Policy Use**

5 Please indicate how/if your confidence has changed with regard to using national level policies relevant to your field of study for each of the following purposes.

Please tick the answer which best describes your level of confidence.

	Less Confident	No Change	More Confident	Much More Confident
a) Naming relevant policies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) Discussing relevant policies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c) Critically analysing policies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d) Evaluating research / the evidence-base behind policies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e) Using policies to argue or advocate for change	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

6 Please indicate how/if your confidence has changed with regard to engaging in the following policy activities.

a) Contributing information or evidence to inform policy development	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
b) Contributing your opinions to inform policy development	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
c) Making policy submissions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
d) Taking feedback in order to improve your work	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
e) Providing constructive feedback to colleagues and other stakeholders	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Please comment briefly on whether and how the programme met your expectations.

Comments and suggestions for change.



# A Culture of Feedback: Staff – Students – Peers

## About this study



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