

CASE STUDY



Stellenbosch University: The Power of Student Voice in the Journey to Success

About Stellenbosch University

Stellenbosch University (SU) has been a cornerstone of South Africa's higher education landscape for over a century. Renowned for world-class knowledge production and cutting-edge technological innovation, SU is a thriving, transformative, and systemically sustainable institution. With a diverse student population of over 33,000, the University conducts impactful research that addresses the complex societal challenges of its country, region, and the world.



blue

CHALLENGE

Moving from Evaluation of Teaching to Enhancement of Learning

Stellenbosch University (SU) had a student feedback challenge. Previously, the University relied on an internal module evaluation survey system integrated into its Learning Management System. However, the system proved to be ineffective for pursuing the goal of enhancing learning. What was needed was a solution that offered greater flexibility and automation.

Dr Antoinette van der Merwe, Chief Director: IT, explained: "SU has a long history of asking feedback from students. Reflection has taken place over the past few years as to how we can increase listening and acting through qualitative and mid-semester feedback with tangible actions taken based on the feedback. Under what conditions can we actually maximise the impact between feedback and student success, and the same with the acting part as well, is an important focus of our work."

Dr Gert Young, Senior Advisor in the Centre for Teaching and Learning, also commented on the institutional need: "Strategically, we want to change the way the University thinks about the purpose of student feedback and shift the feedback culture to an enhancement of learning. The system we had been using was manually intensive and limited in its potential. Our student feedback office often used a set template, when what was needed was a platform with the flexibility to support academics' variety of needs."

SOLUTION

Increased Opportunities for Improved Listening and Acting Through Explorance Blue

In the 2023-24 academic year, SU selected Explorance Blue as the platform to conduct the University's module evaluations and surveys. "We liked Explorance because they have a diverse university client base which engendered trust and confidence, and on a personal level we got on very well with the team," Dr Young said. "We could see a long-term relationship developing. There has been a push on promoting student feedback here for many years. Now, supported by Explorance Blue, and what we feel is the ease of this system is providing is the opportunity and potential to change."

Dr Young shared how the University's adoption of Explorance Blue has helped transform their approach to student feedback: "Our recent implementation of Blue has increased opportunities for improved listening and acting by using feedback to enhance student success aligned to the strategic priorities of teaching and learning."

Blue's customisation capabilities have provided SU with the ability to ask the 'right questions', enabling staff to ask questions important to their teaching. Dr Young emphasised how customisation impacts more than just data collection – it also shapes user engagement. "Customisation also has the

potential to influence users' commitment to and emotional valence towards the feedback process. Where users have the opportunity to ask questions as they like, this can lead to more positive perceptions of the potential of feedback," he revealed.

To transform the student feedback culture at SU from evaluating teaching to enhancing student learning, the first trial run of Blue began in March 2024 to start establishing the practice of collecting formative feedback mid-semester via three open-ended questions. Blue was then rolled out across most undergraduate modules for end-of-semester student feedback in May 2024 via an eight-question survey with Likert scale responses.

"These provide a crucial opportunity for students to voice their opinions and experiences regarding their teaching, learning and assessment," Dr Young said. "They also serve as a valuable mechanism for fostering communication between students and staff, enabling constructive dialogue aimed at enhancing the overall learning environment. Through these, we can continuously evolve and strive towards excellence in teaching-learning-assessment."

OUTCOME

More Holistic and Frequent Feedback

Question personalisation, the involvement of lecturers to create questions for greater engagement, and an intuitive, simple survey creation platform that provides in the moment feedback have all facilitated SU's new approach to student feedback.

"Blue has enabled mid-semester feedback, shorter and more frequent continuous feedback, and more holistic listening throughout the full journey," Dr Young concluded. "Its analytics and reporting tools are incredibly valuable, and Blue can also help us with the distribution of personalised reports, for students, lecturers, and institutionally. We are also excited about the potential of using Explorance's AI-platform MLY for analysis of open-ended comments. I would also point to the value that a partnership with Explorance has in terms of establishing and creating a community for people doing this kind of work in South Africa, because I think we have shared challenges, and generally we have more or less the same goals in mind."

Dr van der Merwe added: "For us, this has been about breaking the silos. The integration between data sources to enable listening and moving towards an effective holistic listening strategy for continuous listening, insights and acting throughout the whole student lifecycle. We want to ensure that the right stakeholders have the right access to results and ask the right questions, and that students know how to give feedback. Feedback also includes reflection for both students and staff as to what I can do differently or what I should be doing more of and not only what someone else should do, ensuring that students can act on feedback and ensuring lecturers and institution can act appropriately. At the heart of feedback is dynamic two-way conversation versus a snapshot in time, welcoming diverse perspectives, and committing to purposeful change."