

**Using Staff-Student Dialogue to Improve Education and Student Experience -  
Moving Away from Course Evaluations and Towards a More Reflective and  
Cooperative Model of Change**

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## **Introduction**

In the evolving landscape of higher education, the pursuit for enhanced educational experiences and student satisfaction has driven various academic institutions to seek innovative approaches for gathering student feedback. Traditionally, formal course evaluations administered at the end of term have served as the cornerstone for assessing teaching effectiveness and student satisfaction. However, many recent pieces of literature have come out to criticize traditional teaching evaluations. Some limitations found through research include heavy biases against marginalized professors such as female instructors, delayed feedback, and a lack of correlation between the evaluations and actual teaching effectiveness (Chávez and Mitchell, 2019). As such, these issues have led UCL to explore a more dynamic and responsive feedback mechanism in order to improve education and student experience.

Continuous Module Dialogue (CMD) is the feedback process that emerged as the most promising alternative to traditional course evaluations. CMD involves providing the opportunity for students to provide frequent and structured feedback throughout the duration of a course and subsequently facilitates an open dialogue between students and instructors. This method thus aims to create a more responsive and adaptive learning environment where issues can be identified promptly instead of at the end-of-term, enabling instructors to make timely adjustments and improvements.

With UCL only recently implementing CMD within the 2022-23 academic year, opportunity for a thorough investigation into the process's effectiveness has been limited. As such, this report presents a literature review, analysis of National Student Survey (NSS) results, and a series of interviews with students and faculty to explore whether this new dialogue has truly improved student experience. Within these interviews, both the benefits and limitations of CMD become apparent with frequent mentions of positives such as effective feedback, but also negatives like survey fatigue. By comparing the outcomes of CMD against traditional course evaluations, I aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of CMD's potential to create a more diverse and improved student feedback process within higher education.

## **Methodology**

The methodology for this research involved three primary components: a literature review, data collection and analysis, and in-depth interviews. To ensure a comprehensive evaluation of the CMD program, I employed both quantitative and qualitative methods. This approach facilitated broad numerical analysis of the process while also allowing for more nuanced, individual discussions on its impact.

### **1. Literature Review**

This literature review aims to provide a clear overview of existing research surrounding traditional student evaluations of teaching (SETs). By consulting various academic journals, this review creates a contextual foundation on the flaws and limitations of traditional course evaluations and subsequently the reasoning behind creating CMD. As such, the review also helps

create a theoretical framework on how CMD should interact with student experience and education in comparison to SETs.

## 2. Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection for this research centered on the reports from the UCL NSS Results for 2022 and the UCL NSS Results for 2023. These two reports were used to analyze potential differences in student satisfaction data from directly before and after the implementation of CMD and offer potential explanations. Direct attention was focused on questions from within the Student Voice section, as these questions most clearly correlated to the possible impacts of CMD on the learning experience.

## 3. Interviews

To complement the quantitative analysis, interviews were conducted to gain qualitative insights into the experiences of faculties and students with CMD. These semi-structured interviews typically lasted around 15-30 minutes and were then transcribed and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns. The first interviews were held with professors from within the UCL Economics Department. The second round of interviews were held with Student Academic Representatives and the Education Officer for the UCL Students' Union. This round was thus able to provide a nuanced perspective since interviewees relayed both their experiences as a representative as well as an average student. These interviews helped to capture detailed, individual viewpoints that enriched the overall evaluation of CMD.

## Literature Review

SETs have been widely criticized in literature for their methodological flaws and inherent biases in assessing teaching effectiveness. One of the primary issues is that SETs often reflect students' biases rather than actual teaching effectiveness. Research has shown that SET scores are significantly influenced by factors unrelated to teaching quality, such as the instructor's gender, race, age, and physical attractiveness (Esarey and Valdes 2020; Kreitzer and Sweet-Cushman 2021). For instance, female and minority instructors often receive lower ratings compared to their male and white counterparts, regardless of their teaching performance (Mitchell and Martin 2018; Chávez and Mitchell 2019).

Moreover, SETs are susceptible to biases based on students' grade expectations and enjoyment of the course. Students who expect higher grades or find the course enjoyable tend to give higher evaluations, which skews the results and undermines the reliability of SETs as a measure of teaching effectiveness (Boring, Ottoboni, and Stark 2016). Additionally, external factors such as the weather on the day the survey is completed can also impact SET scores, further questioning their validity (Inside Higher Ed 2020).

Another critical flaw is the low correlation between SET scores and actual student learning outcomes. Studies have found that high SET scores do not necessarily indicate effective teaching or improved student learning (Kreitzer and Sweet-Cushman 2021). This disconnect suggests that SETs may not be a reliable tool for assessing teaching quality (Clayson 2009).

Furthermore, the over-reliance on SETs in personnel decisions, such as hiring, promotion, and tenure, can have detrimental effects. The biases inherent in SETs can disadvantage faculty from underrepresented groups and those teaching challenging or required courses, leading to inequities in academic careers (Boring, Ottoboni, and Stark 2016).

So, while SETs may be a common tool for evaluating teaching, their methodological flaws and biases call into question their effectiveness and fairness. As such, it has become abundantly clear that within higher education, new, alternative methods of evaluation are needed to ensure equitable and accurate assessments. By implementing CMD, UCL has created a process that emphasizes facilitating a dialogue between staff and student that allows for real-time changes and improvements rather than just a biased, end-of-term evaluation.

### **National Student Survey Results**

Administered annually, the NSS is a voluntary survey open to all final-year undergraduates at UK universities. The survey consists of a series of questions in which respondents rank their agreement with statements in various fields such as quality of teaching, learning resources, student voice, and more. As such, the NSS has emerged as a key instrument for gauging student satisfaction across UK higher education institutions and provides much-needed data insights into the possible effects of CMD on student experience.

For this report, particular attention was paid to the Student Voice section and its sub-questions, which assess how students perceive their opportunities for feedback and the extent to which their feedback is valued and acted upon. By contrasting the results from 2022 to 2023, this section provides crucial comparative data in evaluating the effectiveness of CMD as a feedback mechanism following its implementation.

In 2022, 71% of the 4,985 final-year UCL students responded, while in 2023, the response rate slightly increased to 72% of the 6,450 population. The scores shown below, the Positivity Score, describe the percentage of students who gave either a strongly agree or mostly agree response to each statement.

<b>Question</b>	<b>2022</b>	<b>2023</b>
Student Voice (overall)	67.2	73.1
I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course	83.1	84.2
Staff value students' views and opinions about the course	67.9	74.4
It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on	50.7	60.6

Comparing the data between the 2022 and 2023 NSS reveals an upward trend across all key metrics following the implementation of CMD. While performing hypothesis testing on this data would be ideal to establish statistical significance, the voluntary nature of the survey breaks the necessary condition of random sampling. However, despite this limitation, with such a large percentage of final-year UCL students responding to the survey, observed increases within each category can be attributed to a significant portion of the population. Below, I provide a detailed breakdown of the changes within each question and offer possible explanations.

### *Student Voice:*

Following the implementation of CMD, the overall Student Voice positivity score saw a substantial 5.9 percentage-point increase. This upward trend could be attributed to the more frequent and structured opportunities for feedback provided by CMD, which likely made students feel that their voices were being heard and valued more consistently throughout the academic year.

### *I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course:*

This question saw a modest increase of 1.1 percentage-points, building upon an already relatively high positivity score of 83.1% in 2022. With one of CMD's primary goals being to create more opportunities for students to provide frequent and structured feedback to lecturers, this slight enhancement of the positivity score is a welcome sign.

### *Staff value students' views and opinions about the course:*

The more dialogical nature of CMD likely contributed to the notable 6.5 percentage-point increase. The process, which fosters an open communication between students and staff by allowing instructors to address concerns in real-time rather than at the end of the term, provides ample opportunity for students to feel valued in their feedback.

### *It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on:*

This question featured the most significant jump within the section with an increase of 9.9 percentage-points. This suggests that CMD has improved the transparency of the feedback loop by ensuring students are informed about the actions taken by staff based on their input and could thus potentially encourage greater student participation in future feedback.

While these improvements are promising, it's important to note that the data reflects correlation, not causation. Although the increase in scores align and are correlated with the introduction of CMD, there are various unobserved factors that could have influenced these results. For example, by 2023, the effects of COVID-19 on the university experience were waning, and there may have been other university-wide or departmental initiatives that could have played a role. While the data suggests that CMD has positively impacted the student experience, more research is needed to determine its specific influence on these changes.

## **Interviews**

Following my quantitative analysis of the NSS results, I turned to collect more qualitative evidence in the form of in-depth interviews. Between the faculty, Student Union, and regular students, there were surprisingly large overlaps in specific positives and negatives mentioned within the interviews. Summaries of the key points with directly relevant quotations are included below.

## *Faculty Feedback*

To gain insight into the faculty perspective on CMD, I connected with five UCL professors within the Economics Department: Dr. Ramin Nassehi, Dr. Duygu Ozdemir, Dr. Malcom Pemberton, Dr. Michaela Tincani, and Dr. Pedro Carneiro.

### Positives:

1. Structured Feedback Process
  - CMD provides a more organized approach to collecting student feedback, offering regular opportunities for insights throughout the term.
    - “I like the way the structure and the discipline it provides... It allows for more consistent check-ins with students” (Nassehi 2024).
2. Real-Time Adjustments
  - Professors valued the ability to make real-time changes since CMD allows for immediate adjustments to teaching methods and materials based on student feedback.
    - “For instance, they were saying that they want to learn more about a specific topic, so I added some more lecture time for it.” And “I decided to move releasing the sample exam earlier in the term so that the students have more time... I made some changes based on students’ needs” (Ozdemir 2024).
    - “It helps me adjust going along... seeing how things are going and addressing issues as they arise” (Nassehi 2024).
3. Early Issue Detection
  - Several professors found that CMD enabled them to identify and address course-related issues early on. This early detection allowed for timely interventions and adjustments to course content.
    - “The structure of picking up problems early on is a key benefit” (Nassehi 2024).

### Negatives:

1. Low Response Rates
  - One of the major concerns for all the professors was the already low and subsequently decreasing participation over time.
    - “For CMD, virtually nobody responded. Nobody. I think the first one was probably about eight, the second one about five.” (Pemberton 2024).
    - “The very first survey had maybe like 30 students out of 140 students. And then it gradually dropped throughout the term and the final survey was barely one or two students” (Ozdemir 2024).
2. Lack of Actionable Feedback

- Some professors found that the feedback received was too vague or insufficiently detailed to inform meaningful course improvements. Additionally, multiple professors expressed a desire for a more formal evaluation on top of CMD.
    - “If students don’t request help in detail, then it’s pointless,” (Ozdemir 2024).
    - “I actually miss the formal evaluation... The dialogue one is more of, I want to see how things are going... but the overall, by the end of the day, it’s more pedagogy. Much more theoretical and I miss formal data” (Nassehi 2024).
3. Time Management Challenges
- Integrating CMD into lecture time posed difficulties for some professors since both students were reluctant to engage during class and professors didn’t want to waste class time.
    - “I positively didn’t give them any time in the lecture to do it. Because I don’t think it’s particularly worthwhile” (Pemberton 2024).
    - “I give them time in class to fill out the form, but they prefer not to do it during breaks” (Ozdemir 2024).
4. Lack of Awareness
- One professor was not even aware what CMD was and thus it can be assumed he did not receive enough guidance from the department.
    - “I do not even know what this form is” (Carneiro 2024).

### *Student Feedback*

A key aspect of CMD is that no part of the process is shared or collected by administrators and remains private with the instructor. However, this can create a potential problem in the terms of monitoring its employment. As such, academic representatives from the Student Union were given the task of listening to their peers and feeding back to their departments any issues with CMD. I thus felt it was important to interview Shaban Chaudhary, the Education Officer, and three anonymous academic representatives on their experiences as both a Union representative and as regular students.

Positives:

1. Timely Feedback
  - CMD allows for real-time feedback during the academic year, helping students see the adjustments in their course right away rather than the end of year.
    - “The process created a sort of general consensus on how people are feeling throughout the year rather than at the end so that changes could be made” (Academic Rep 1, 2024).
    - “It’s good to have the check-in points throughout the year... you might catch issues that could be solved on the spot” (Academic Rep 2, 2024).
2. Enhanced Communication and Engagement

- CMD encourages more frequent and meaningful student engagement compared to traditional feedback methods, thus helping create a more dynamic and responsive learning environment.
    - “I think that frequency of how it’s CMD’s done as compared to the traditional way of taking feedback is what makes it really innovative, unique, and inspiring for students to get engaged” (Chaudhary 2024).
    - “I guess you can see we kind of connect to the course more because people know their input matters and can lead to real changes” (Academic Rep 3, 2024).
3. Direct Impact on Modules
- CMD provides can lead to changes being made in a module based on what students feel is best for the course.
    - “I remember students didn’t feel like they were getting enough structured feedback on the homework’s, and so I know that they mentioned and told tutors of that module to give back better feedback” (Academic Rep 1, 2024).
    - “I remember someone in pharmacy, they got one of their exams moved online because students just realized that that’s the more practical way of doing it” (Chaudhary 2024).

#### Negatives:

1. Survey Fatigue
  - Many students feel that there are already too many surveys distributed among UCL, and thus feel disincentivized from adding CMD to the list.
    - “Survey fatigue is a bit of an issue... if you have too many surveys, people sometimes aren’t just bothered to fill them in” (Academic Rep 2, 2024).
    - “Honestly, it sometimes feels like we’re being asked for feedback too often. It’s hard to keep up, and I think the quality of responses kind of suffer because of that” (Academic Rep 3, 2024).
2. Inconsistent Participation and Perceived Impact
  - CMD doesn’t always capture the voices of all students, as participation can be sporadic, resulting in a skewed representation of the class’s views.
    - “The same few people tend to give feedback, like I’m definitely guilty of that...so I’m not sure sort of diverse the actual like responses are” (Academic Rep 3, 2024).
3. Awareness and Guidance Issues
  - Both regular students and the academic representatives receive little guidance on CMD’s purpose or what their role within the process is.
    - “I would say most people, me included in this, probably didn’t understand that much about what CMD was beforehand” (Academic Rep 1, 2024).

- “I didn’t really get any guidance on CMD ... I think having a written paragraph exactly what it is and what you can do with it would have worked well” (Academic Rep 2, 2024).

Through these interviews, a significant overlap between faculty and student perspectives were revealed, particularly in the valuation of the real-time feedback and enhanced communication that is facilitated by CMD. However, both groups also share concerns about survey fatigue and the need for greater awareness and guidance on CMD’s purpose and use.

## **Conclusion**

This study serves as a thorough investigation into the potential of CMD as a mechanism to enhance the student experience at UCL and other higher education institutions. By employing a mixed-methods approach, integrating both quantitative data from the National Student Survey NSS and qualitative insights from in-depth interviews, I have provided a comprehensive evaluation of CMD’s impact. The quantitative analysis revealed significant improvements in key metrics such as student voice and perceived value of feedback, while the qualitative interviews highlighted the nuanced experiences of both faculty and students. The two pieces come together to reveal the important changes that CMD has brought to the educational experience at UCL, but also the flaws where improvements can be made in the future.

Working on this project has been particularly exciting given that I have been provided the opportunity to help create a direct impact on the student experience at UCL. Speaking candidly with various professors and other students provided me with new insights into my own educational experience that I had never previously thought of. The whole experience in turn has been both professionally rewarding and personally fulfilling. This research not only validates the efficacy of CMD, but also sets the stage for its broader implementation into wider academia. Lastly, I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor, Dr. Parama Chaudhury, for her guidance and support throughout my research, as well as all my interviewees for agreeing to speak with me for this project.

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