

Module evaluation in a pandemic and beyond

What is student leaders' 'ask' of universities
gathering their views on teaching and learning?



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Executive Summary

Explorance has commissioned independent research amongst Students' Union (SU) representatives across the UK and Ireland.

Questions were asked around their experience of module evaluation surveys, how universities' approaches to capturing student feedback via surveys shifted (including during the first semester of 2020-21) in the context of the Covid-19 and national lockdown, and what institutions could do differently going forward.

These are the main findings from in-depth interviews undertaken in January/February 2021:

- Covid-19, and the move from face-to-face to online learning, has forced universities to pivot their approaches to capturing the student voice. Alongside end-of-module evaluation surveys, many institutions have embraced mid-module surveys for assessment of teaching and learning as well as Pulse surveys for course evaluation and wider assessment of issues around student sentiment and wellbeing, presenting an opportunity to develop this practice further.
- Whilst there is a clear expectation from student leaders that universities should actively listen to module evaluation feedback, at the same time better and more open communication is required to help students' themselves understand what changes are possible in follow-up and therefore to manage their expectations. Students' own perceptions – and lack of understanding – as to how their feedback is used (and benefits them) and is applied by their institution for quality assurance and quality enhancement purposes, is a related issue.
- Closing the feedback loop is the biggest challenge facing universities around module evaluation surveys, and one that is still not addressed sufficiently despite the changes in approach brought about by Covid-19. However, student representatives insisted that this problem was not solely down to the institution to overcome and highlighted a collective responsibility to own this process. Some examples of partnership approaches between universities and SUs point to ways to address this issue in collaboration and may be adopted elsewhere.
- All SU leaders interviewed for this research say that end-of module evaluation surveys are here to stay. These remain a hugely valuable component of capturing student feedback, with student representatives highlighting these as robust and measurable. However, the pandemic has accelerated the shift of these online given that in-person paper-based surveys are not possible, and there are also opportunities to encompass quantitative and qualitative insight and complementary feedback mechanisms including mid-module or interim Pulse surveys.
- Universities, driven by higher education policy directives, are generally congratulated by SU leaders as having stepped up their strategies on an individual basis to listening to students during lockdown, but there is an opportunity to strive for greater consistency in approach across the sector.

By better understanding these issues from the perspective of student leaders, we will in turn apply this learning into our developmental practice at Explorance and advise universities that we work with on the opportunities for innovation.

Introduction

What is student leaders' 'ask' of universities gathering their views on teaching and learning through module evaluation surveys and beyond?

Following on from our eBook, "Engaging the student voice in our 'new normal': How are universities planning to capture, and act upon, feedback from students in 2020-21?", published in November 2020 drawing on the perspectives of university leaders, we commissioned independent research amongst Students' Union (SU) representatives around their opinions on the module evaluation and feedback process.

We wanted to gauge their own experience of module evaluation surveys, how universities' approaches to capturing student feedback via surveys shifted (including during the first semester of 2020-21) in the context of the Covid-19 and national lockdown, and what institutions could do differently going forward.

We also explored issues around SU leaders' expectations of universities in terms of responding to student voice, how module evaluation feedback is being used to support quality assurance and quality enhancement processes, and the extent to which universities and SU teams are working together on this agenda.

In the following pages we share the findings of our in-depth interviews with SU leaders across the UK and Ireland.

I would like to thank Hillary Gyebi-Ababio, Vice President Higher Education at the NUS, for her thought-provoking article at the end of this report, and indeed everyone who has contributed to the research.



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Student Leaders' Strategic Challenge

There is a clear expectation from Students' Union (SU) leaders that universities should listen to module evaluation feedback, but at the same time "better and more open communication" is required to help students themselves understand what changes are possible in follow-up.

"We expect the University to actively listen to students and act on the information received," said Jawad Ahmad, Vice President (Education) at Aston Students' Union. "Students are the best experts on the lived experience. In effect they are consumers because they buy a service and give feedback on that. There is definitely a requirement for universities to use student feedback for quality assurance and quality enhancement processes. We see it with the National Student Survey (NSS) and the Office for Students (OfS), which is asking universities to report on how this is being done. This is an issue across the sector, and I do not see many universities doing this really well, but I think Aston is well prepared and trying to make sure that students receive the best possible experience."

Managing expectations

Reading University Students' Union Education Officer George Ingram flagged that the "rising consumerist approach in relation to value for money means that universities need to take student feedback seriously". However, he said expectation management was also key. "Making sure that the University listens to the student voice is a really important mission in our SU," he explained. "Reputationally it is better for universities to acknowledge any desired change, reflect student sentiment, and indicate where they can improve particularly where things are not great. At the same time it is important to manage expectations: not all feedback can be acted on. SUs are uniquely positioned to know what is happening behind the scenes to benefit what students want the most. So universities should promise to try their hardest, whilst understanding it is not possible or necessary to act on every single piece of feedback."

Anya Nikolaeva, Vice President Academic Affairs at Regent's University London Student Union, agreed that "compromise" was needed but that this was often hard to achieve in practice. "Firstly, we challenge the University around capturing and acting on what students want," she said. "We expect feedback to be listened to, and for the University to try to make things work on the back of that, but beyond that compromise and meeting in the middle can be a challenge. However, we always push for clarity on what is going on – better communication and openness, rather than giving false hope, is an approach we look for."



"Better communication and openness, rather than giving false hope, is an approach we look for"

Anya Nikolaeva, Vice President Academic Affairs,
Regent's University London Student Union

"As a SU we expect our university to effectively respond to student feedback," revealed Tim Hewes-Belton, Student Engagement Manager at Worcester Students' Union. "A lot of the issues we have had this academic year have been around communication and closing the feedback loop with students. This is a sector-wide issue though. Universities should not be afraid to say if there is something they are working on and this is not solved as yet, but my experience is the sector as a whole is reluctant to do that. Better, and more open communication, would leave students a lot happier."

Sector policy directives

Tim, and other SU representatives, highlighted external policy drivers that mean institutions are having to do more to ensure that teaching and learning is delivering value by undertaking module evaluation and other student surveys. "I do think universities are stepping up their work around capturing and responding to the student voice," he said. "The challenge from the Competition and Markets Authority and OfS is there, and ultimately this is directly

related to recruitment and the competitive HE model that government is wanting to develop. The NSS, and how this is built into the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), means this whole issue has a more significant impact than ever before. Getting a Gold, Silver or Bronze rating in the TEF has meaning for Vice-Chancellors, so universities in general are worried about that.”

Similarly, in Scotland and Ireland, policy initiatives are encouraging more progress on student voice. “Through my work with QAA Scotland’s Enhancement Themes, acting as lead on the Student-Led Project and a member of the Theme Leadership team, and as Scottish representative on QAA UK’s Student Strategic Advisory Committee, I am only too aware of the focus on student voice,” said Alex Hedlund, Vice President Education at Heriot-Watt University Student Union. “There has definitely been an emphasis among universities in Scotland on how they gather course evaluation survey (and other student voice) data and improve the way they close the feedback loop.”

Quality and Qualifications Ireland, and the Union of Students in Ireland, which fulfils the NSS role to an extent in that surveys are issued. So policy does exist, but it is sometimes quite disjointed and is often dependent on individuals. Equally many institutions are waking up to the reality that without students there is no university, that they are publicly-funded institutions from the taxpayer, and as a public good they are accountable and responsible to students.”

Naoise added: “There is a big gap on student input and seeking views on what they want from their course – and there is an opportunity for the University to adapt its approaches to capturing student feedback through module evaluation. There is, however, a sense that universities can be resistant to change, and changes can be slow. Lecturers may or may not be responsive in terms of the feedback provided, but students do expect a response to concerns raised.”



“Many institutions are waking up to the reality that they are accountable and responsible to students”

Naoise Crowley, President,
University College Cork Students’ Union

University College Cork Students’ Union President Naoise Crowley agreed: “Here in Ireland we have the National Student Engagement Programme, a partnership initiative jointly developed by the Higher Education Authority,

Pre-Covid Perspectives

Many Students' Union (SU) leaders interviewed for this report spoke about their personal experiences of module evaluation surveys, pinpointing issues around survey administration, poor understanding of questions, low response rates, not being told how their feedback was being used, and not personally benefitting from it.

Angel Layer, former Vice President (Education and Democracy) and Research and Insights Assistant at University of Portsmouth Students' Union, recalled: "In my first term studying at Portsmouth, in 2015, our module evaluation surveys were undertaken on paper, with the forms passed around in the lecture to over 100 students. I remember thinking that if we were to complete these over five minutes at the start of the lecture then students would be likely to fill them out better, and if they were done five minutes at the end of the lecture then students would generally rush or not complete these. I would frantically circle numbers against each question and not say what I really wanted to say. For the second term module evaluation surveys moved from lecture to seminar, and with the tutor present we definitely took more time to complete these. For students not in the lecture/seminar, I assumed they would not complete surveys at all. I do not remember seeing this process change any further until my final year in 2019, by which point surveys had moved online."

No impact on current students

Regent's University London Student Union Vice President Academic Affairs Anya Nikolaeva also shared her recollections. "Module evaluation surveys are the main formal way of capturing the student voice on the quality of teaching and learning," she said. "When I was a student, these used to be done on paper and in class, but frankly response rates depended on who was there on the day. It was not something that students would go out of their way to complete if they were not in class and also the self-motivation to give feedback that would only benefit the next cohort was generally not there. Whilst surveys are now online, there is a higher but not astronomically different level in response."

Lexi Ehresmann, Vice President Education at University of Stirling Students' Union, and Aston Students' Union Vice President (Education) Jawad Ahmad also stressed

timing as an issue. "During my studies we undertook a module evaluation survey in the final week or two of each semester, meaning we had completed almost the entire module, which was helpful for staff and informing the following year but not for the current cohort," Lexi explained. Jawad concurred: "I remember a time when only 1% of the whole year group completed their module evaluation survey. These surveys were always undertaken at the end of term when students would generally not feel the benefits themselves."



"I can remember thinking that I do not know quite what happens to the feedback I am giving"

George Ingram, Education Officer,
Reading University Students' Union

"We would complete course evaluation surveys at the end of each semester during my time as a student," added Reading University Students' Union Education Officer George Ingram. "Typically, this would involve filling in a paper form about the module and the lecturer and giving ratings out of 10. I remember this moving online for my dissertation module, but with workload there was a tendency to disengage. There would also be an opportunity to provide feedback on a more regular basis to the course representative. But I can remember thinking at the time that I do not know quite what happens to the feedback I am giving. As Education Officer I can see similar practices continuing."



Lack of clarity on how feedback is used

Naoise Crowley, President of University College Cork Students' Union, reported: "In my experience, the University's approach to module evaluation is fairly straightforward. Firstly, it is up to the lecturer as to whether they invite feedback in the first place, and typically it is done through a paper being handed out in class with questions and multiple options to choose from. It remains unclear what exactly lecturers do with the information that students provide them through module evaluation, and practice varies from department to department. Each individual department has autonomy on approach."



Fanni Zombor, Vice President Engagement,
Open University Students Association

"We only get to hear the extremes: so really happy or really upset students, and the happy medium voices get lost"

At the Open University, which offers flexible part-time study, supported distance and open learning, the Student Experience on a Module (SEaM) survey is an important component of its student voice activity. "Every student on every module is invited to take part in this survey two to three weeks before the end of the module, and they are asked a standard set of closed and open questions," revealed Fanni Zombor, Vice President Engagement at Open University Students Association. "Whilst this approach works in terms of collecting feedback, we only really get to hear the extremes: so really happy students or really upset students, and the happy medium voices get lost. Also, because OU students do not generally interact with anyone else apart from their tutors, often their responses are based solely on their experience of

an individual tutor. One challenge is that unlike in 'brick' universities, OU students complete their SEaM survey for a particular module, but then they quickly move on to another module and never interact with that module again. This means that any feedback on that module will not directly benefit them. There is more opportunity for students to feedback and achieve change at the middle point of any module."

Whilst practices in some institutions have not changed significantly over the years, and challenges remain, other universities have reported more success on innovation which began well before the Covid-19 pandemic. One of these is Portsmouth. "During my time as Vice President (Education and Democracy) in 2017-18 I worked with the University in a feedback mechanisms project which resulted in the new course and module evaluation surveys which were designed to evaluate the new curriculum from 2019," Angel said. "As the SU's Research and Insights Assistant in 2018-19 we also developed an approach to provide really strong processes for student insight. The University is very committed to the student voice, and valuing students' views and opinions, in partnership with the SU. In my experience, students are generally good at giving negative feedback, but less good at giving positive feedback, but at Portsmouth that feedback was always sought. Running surveys – module, course and others – brought the issues together and informed what we should be doing about them. The insight meant we were able to respond to these better."

Lockdown ‘Pivot’ and Pulse Surveys

Covid-19, and the subsequent move from face-to-face to online learning, has forced universities to pivot their approaches to capturing the student voice. Alongside end-of-module evaluation surveys, many institutions have embraced mid-module surveys for assessment of teaching and learning, as well as Pulse surveys to gather insight on these and wider issues around student sentiment and wellbeing.

Fully online and student-friendly

In fact, for many Students’ Union (SU) leaders, their institution has noticeably accelerated its processes around student feedback during the pandemic. Two examples in Scotland illustrate this. “The University has done two things to develop its approach: one is to update the questions being asked so they are more specific to the Faculty, and the second is to introduce a mid-module check-in as a less formal way of catching issues early on,” said University of Stirling Students’ Union Vice President



Education Lexi Ehresmann. “This has brought quite a significant improvement, and whilst I know this was something the University had been looking at introducing but had not got around to, when Covid-19 hit they bit the bullet and actioned it. The module evaluation process is now exclusively online, whereas four years ago when I first came to the University it was done by paper.”



“Previously surveys got a 15% response rate on average – they were lengthy, very wordy”

Alex Hedlund, Vice President Education,
Heriot-Watt University Student Union

Heriot-Watt University has seen a recent restructure of how it tackles course evaluation surveys. “Our outgoing SU President is now the University staff member leading on the surveys and student voice,” reported Alex Hedlund, Vice President Education at Heriot-Watt University Student Union. “Previously surveys got a 15% response rate on average – they were lengthy, very wordy, and students were not always able to comprehend what they were being asked – and these have been redesigned in student-friendly way. Not only has this enhanced the quantitative data provided, but it has also allowed more space for qualitative responses which is important for understanding the story behind the numerical data. We have been able to use these surveys this year to ask about Covid-19 and the shift to online, as well as general questions and specifics from each course/department.”

In England, Regent’s University London has changed its format and approach to surveys during the 2020-21 academic year. “Pre-Covid, I think the University’s focus was more on the National Student Survey and trying to model the requirement for students to have the opportunity to give feedback, rather acting on it,” explained Anya Nikolaeva, Vice President Academic Affairs at Regent’s University London Student Union. “This year there was a Covid-19 response survey in week 5/6 and then a follow-up survey three to four weeks later, and finally the module evaluation survey the week after teaching had finished. This was supported through

bi-weekly online meetings between ourselves and Faculty leads on the online set-up. During this recent period, the University has been much quicker in terms of capturing and acting on student feedback. Staff have been really attentive and there has been a significant improvement in students being listened to.”

Supporting interim evaluations

Mid-module evaluations, and Pulse surveys, were highlighted by other SU representatives. Niamh Moore, Education President at St Mary’s University Students’ Union, said: “What I can say is the introduction of mid-module evaluations has demonstrated the University’s desire to change and, in a post-Covid world, I would like these to remain. The other consideration is whether to make module evaluation surveys compulsory to improve response rates, which have dropped after moving from paper to online.” Aston Students’ Union Vice President (Education) Jawad Ahmad added: “Now, accelerated by Covid-19, we are in a position where Pulse surveys are being undertaken every two weeks. Seeing what students are thinking about their course enables module leaders to make decisions on areas to change or develop. The pandemic led to the University doing more surveys, but we have identified an opportunity to take a more innovative approach by capturing and responding to student feedback (including module evaluation surveys) in real time.”

Tim Hewes-Belton, Student Engagement Manager at Worcester Students’ Union, reflected: “Module evaluation surveys have been an ongoing element of our wider work on the student voice for the past four years. They are not something we have direct involvement in very often, and we do not get individual scores unless we ask to see them, but certainly there has been an ongoing debate on paper versus online surveys and a gradual movement to online which has now sped up as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. This year all module evaluation surveys are online and were completed in January.”



“There has been a gradual movement to online which has sped up as a result of the pandemic”

Tim Hewes-Belton, Student Engagement Manager,
Worcester Students’ Union

For others, whilst Covid-19 has led to a different ethos in terms of response to module evaluation surveys, this is still work in progress. “The Student Experience on a Module surveys have been an important component of the student voice during the pandemic,” said Open University Students Association Vice President Engagement Fanni Zombor. “Unlike at many ‘brick’ universities, we have not had to change the approach and I would say end-of-module surveys have been taken more seriously this year. The University has acted on these more positively. Student consultations have also really taken off at a module, course and institutional level, and these forums give students an opportunity to interact with each other. Students would like more opportunity for feedback after tutor marked assignments, for example, but there is not one way to feed back in real time. Therefore, the bigger picture around course evaluation feedback remains a developing one.”

The Perennial Problem to Overcome

Students' Union (SU) leaders are in agreement on the biggest challenge facing universities around module evaluation surveys, and one that is still not addressed sufficiently despite the changes in approach brought about by Covid-19: closing the loop. However, student representatives insisted this problem was not solely down to the institution to overcome.

The role of academic reps

"Closing the feedback loop is something we are all interested in but do not have a definitive answer to," said Lexi Ehresmann, Vice President Education at University of Stirling Students' Union. "When I was a student I always wondered where my feedback went, and how it would impact on me. When we started a new module, we were certainly never told by staff the actions they had taken from the previous year's feedback. Actually, other methods for closing the loop can be far more effective, especially through the academic representative system. Student reps are more likely to feedback, not least because it is in their role descriptions to do so, but also because it is easier to feedback to peers as part of everyday conversations. However, this route can also be variable, and the challenge for me overseeing the student reps is to increase the consistency and accountability."



Lexi Ehresmann, Vice President Education,
University of Stirling Students' Union

"Closing the feedback loop is something we are all interested in but do not have a definitive answer to"

Open University Students Association Vice President Engagement Fanni Zombor highlighted other opportunities to feedback to students. "Overall, I think the University is very good at acting on feedback, but closing the feedback loop is the biggest problem," she revealed. "They do things, they change things, but are not good at communicating it. Communication is better through other feedback mechanisms such as our representation on the

Student Voice steering group, quarterly Faculty meetings our academic representatives have with senior staff, and presentations at School governance meetings. Initiatives like Student Voice Week are an opportunity to close the loop, and it is eye-opening for many students who are at a distance all the time and do not necessarily see what we do."

Niamh Moore, Education President at St Mary's University Students' Union, agreed: "We have made a number of changes to our academic course representative system this year, including Faculty reps for student voice and widening participation reps which I manage, and they sit on programme boards so providing a further direct opportunity for feedback. That said, and this may just be my personal experience as a student, but at the start of a new module the course leader would always summarise student feedback from the previous cohort and how that had been acted on. The extent to which this is general practice I am not sure, but that approach showed there was proactivity in closing the loop."

Collective responsibility

Some SU leaders also identified a mutual responsibility for students to support the process alongside universities. Heriot-Watt University Student Union Vice President Education Alex Hedlund said: "Closing the loop will always be a problem that exists but is something that both sides have to take responsibility for. Staff may be doing all they can, yet a significant part of the student population just want to get their degree and leave. They will not necessarily respond to emails or messages on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). It is important to manage expectations and that is where the student representative system comes in handy. Partnership working, especially with students who are not as engaged, is absolutely key."

Tim Hewes-Belton, Student Engagement Manager at Worcester Students' Union, concurred: "There is a perennial challenge in getting students to complete online surveys and there are question marks over how much they value the process. We try to close the feedback loop through our course representative system and also through the University's recently revised staff-student liaison committees. Arguably we are much better at closing



the loop on issues that arise in surveys, but there is a need to improve the feedback loop and consistency of response in these other feedback mechanisms. Previously there was no formal link between the course and school level, and no formal avenue for reporting, and we now have that through the staff-student liaison committees, so this is progress.”



“Having genuine insight to act upon, and going back to students through ‘you said, we did’ mechanisms is so important”

Angel Layer, former Vice President (Education and Democracy) and Research and Insights Assistant, University of Portsmouth Students’ Union

Reading University Students’ Union Education Officer George Ingram added: “The systems in place at Reading to capture feedback are generally effective, but there is definitely an issue with timing. If module evaluation surveys are done at the end of the semester then the current cohort do not receive any benefit from that: students do not tend to see their feedback being acted on at first-hand. Whether the University closes the loop as well as it could is up for debate. Institutionally it is perhaps

easier than at School level to close the feedback loop but going forward more work on this would be incredibly beneficial. Whilst communicating what you are looking to improve upon may be difficult perhaps, from personal experience I know how valuable it would be to understand next steps.”

Changing perceptions

“The issue of closing the loop effectively on feedback and the ‘what does this mean for us?’ question clearly remain,” said Angel Layer, former Vice President (Education and Democracy) and Research and Insights Assistant at University of Portsmouth Students’ Union. “Sometimes surveys are undertaken but the results are not seen until two or three years down the line. But having genuine insight to act upon, and going back to students through ‘you said, we did’ mechanisms is so important. I have seen this at first-hand in my placements through the Ambitious Futures Graduate Trainee programme at SOAS University of London, where most feedback surveys last year were centred on Covid-19; and now at Roehampton University where the plan was always to move module evaluation surveys from paper to online in the past year, but now the pandemic has forced this quicker.”

Quality Enhancement in Partnership

Students' Union (SU) representatives recognise that whilst their role is to hold universities accountable on how student feedback is used for quality assurance and quality enhancement purposes, their presence on staff-student committees and joint working on university-wide projects present an opportunity to address issues in partnership with executive teams.

Informing institution practice

"We know there is a requirement from the Office for Students for institutions to meet annual targets on the experience of students and the University is committed to using student feedback for quality assurance and quality enhancement," said Niamh Moore, Education President at St Mary's University Students' Union. "It definitely uses feedback from module evaluation surveys and other feedback mechanisms to inform practice, but clearly is not able to action everything. A good example is a recent 28-page report produced on assessment and academic support, which includes statistics, analysis, and student quotes. Time would not have been spent on that if the University was not serious."



"The University definitely uses feedback from module evaluation surveys and other feedback mechanisms to inform practice"

Niamh Moore, Education President,
St Mary's University Students' Union

Worcester Students' Union Student Engagement Manager Tim Hewes-Belton agreed: "How module evaluation surveys feed into our annual course experience survey, which is undertaken alongside the National Student Survey (NSS) and draws on questions largely based on the NSS alongside others, seems to be something that works well. All this insight goes into the course annual review reports, which involve our course representative teams managed by the SU. Through this wider process

the University identifies courses which are struggling and identifies appropriate actions. Where there is a limitation is tackling those challenging courses across years and looking at patterns from cohort to cohort."

Lexi Ehresmann, Vice President Education at University of Stirling Students' Union, added: "What we can say is that a major aspect of module evaluation survey feedback is to enhance quality. I sit on various university committees around this and I can see the commitment to this agenda. However, we need communication and transparency with the student body. Partnership and collaboration is required to make module evaluation surveys work – practically students have to give their time and input – but students also have to be sensible on their expectations from the University on what is going to happen next. For the University, it is not always appropriate for them to act on feedback, but in that case, they just need to say what they are doing and why they are doing it (or not)."

Overcoming resistance to change

"There is still work to be done – there always is – but hopefully the feedback from module evaluation surveys equips the University to get better in the future," said Anya Nikolaeva, Vice President Academic Affairs at Regent's University London Student Union. "Responding quickly and openly is a must, and even if change is not possible the University should demonstrate clearly to students that their voice has been heard and explain why they can or cannot do something. I wish, and I hope, that student feedback is used by the University for quality assurance and quality enhancement purposes. It can certainly be used better and more. I suspect it is currently used selectively and to support changes the University is already planning to make, rather than really interrogating the feedback to enhance quality. I have sat on university committees discussing this agenda, and the use of student feedback is not there. This is disappointing, but unsurprising."

For Heriot-Watt University Student Union Vice President Education Alex Hedlund, it is “paramount that universities ensure teaching and learning is delivering value by acting on feedback”. He said: “Often there is a reluctance to change, especially if courses have been doing well in terms of recruitment, and cultural resistance can get in the way of progress. However, if they do not listen to student feedback, and take on board what is happening in their experience, this can have wider implications. Students will talk to siblings, or their friends, and then all of a sudden prospective students can be lost because those students will not want to go to a university where their voice is not listened to. Word-of-mouth is so much more powerful than it used to be. Additionally, in a time where the value of going to university is being questioned when you can do qualifications online or through alternative providers, universities need to be even hotter on this issue.”

Genuine collaboration

Alex continued: “One of the three things I set out to achieve at the start of this academic year was to empower students to make their courses what they need them to be. I am keen to continue to push for co-creation where students and academic reps take a proactive lead on student voice activities and can bring change. On the back of feedback this year we have seen examples of staff reinventing their teaching style to meet student needs and using it to inform their own understanding of what and how students are learning. The University, overall, has definitely done more to capture and respond to student voice this year. This includes forums that not only discuss the issues but lead to communication of clear action plans. The partnership between the SU and the University is fantastic. In our everyday conversations we have an equal say on a range of matters.”

Jawad Ahmad, Vice President (Education) at Aston Students’ Union, expressed a similar model. “The University has always listened to students in my time in position,” he said. “I think historically the level of engagement from the institution and students has been quite low, but Covid has pushed the student voice to the forefront of their thinking; students are actively feeding back, and the University is actively listening. This is something we want to take forward because it is working. Module evaluation surveys can benefit from this general ethos and direction of travel too. If there are issues and concerns arising in these surveys, the University has demonstrated that it takes students’ ideas on board.”



“Covid has pushed the student voice to the forefront of their thinking; students are actively feeding back, and the University is actively listening”

Jawad Ahmad, Vice President (Education), Aston Students’ Union

“There is a genuine partnership between the SU and the University and, whilst we may not agree on everything, there is never an initiative we have to fight them on to get into the room,” added Open University Students Association Vice President Engagement Fanni Zombor.

Surveys Here to Stay

“Course evaluation surveys always have to exist, and we need to recognise they are a necessary part of universities’ annual monitoring processes and feed into institutional subject reviews alongside a host of data,” insisted Alex Hedlund, Vice President Education at Heriot-Watt University Student Union. “They are here to stay; it is just the focus of the surveys that will evolve. We used to have separate surveys for each course, and now we have one survey with different links per course, and this is all done online. There is discussion around Pulse surveys being undertaken more often and stop-start-go mechanisms where student feedback can be captured and responded to before it is too late. This is an iterative process and measuring year-on-year progress is important.”

Robust and measurable

Students’ Union (SU) leaders are supportive of the role module evaluation feedback plays in ensuring that teaching and learning is delivering value, and their wider place in commitment to student voice. “Module evaluation surveys, and quantitative data generally, are extremely robust in terms of looking at things and are more easily measurable,” said Reading University Students’ Union Education Officer George Ingram. “They are especially useful for narrowing down the focus to specific issues and then providing a platform to act on them.” Tim Hewes-Belton, Student Engagement Manager at Worcester Students’ Union, added: “Module evaluation surveys are not going anywhere and will remain an important aspect of student voice. I see these staying online but going forward being undertaken in person in the classroom in the same way as paper surveys were. It will be interesting to see what these surveys show over the course of this academic year, and universities will be holding their breath given the bigger picture we are all operating in.”

Evolution rather than revolution

At the same time, evolution rather than revolution of surveys is desired, with learnings from the pivot during lockdown being developed even further. “The University has recently introduced real-time feedback which empowers module teams to ask specifics during a module, but this does not exist everywhere yet,” said Fanni Zombor, Vice President Engagement at Open University Students Association.

For Naoise Crowley, President at University College Cork Students’ Union, “there is more work to be done on module evaluation”, outlining his views on the process: “I expect things will change in terms of how module evaluation surveys are administered. Giving paper surveys to students any time in the near future is going to be almost impossible and we have to embrace technology. However, our Student Feedback on Online Learning report (published in December 2020) does show that 91% of students feel overwhelmed by the amount of online content – so there has to be a balance because the human element of higher education has never been more important than right now – but there is certainly room for innovation.”



“Module evaluation surveys, and quantitative data generally, are extremely robust in terms of looking at things and are more easily measurable”

George Ingram, Education Officer, Reading University Students’ Union

“There is definitely a place for module evaluation surveys going forward, but these could change in focus to specific areas of learning across a course rather than capturing feedback on the whole module,” suggested Angel Layer, former Vice President (Education and Democracy) and Research and Insights Assistant at University of Portsmouth Students’ Union. “In my own direct experience module evaluation surveys are great for quantitative, but not always qualitative feedback, so they can potentially evolve to enable deeper understanding of specific issues. Timing is also a consideration. Does the student beginning university life in 2024 want to wait until the end of their module to provide feedback, or would they expect to do a Pulse survey on specific issues every couple of weeks to give time to effect a change rather than giving their opinion of the whole 12 weeks?”



Complementary feedback mechanisms

Angel also outlined an opportunity to “better triangulate data – Pulse surveys, module evaluation surveys and other feedback mechanisms – to provide truly representative, and more in-depth, student voice”. She said: “In a world which is moving so fast digitally, we should also not forget there are other feedback mechanisms too. For example, feedback received through a survey can feel quite different if it is received via email or over the phone. The chatty, or qualitative aspect, is sometimes more valuable.”

“Right now, I think online module evaluation surveys are here to stay and we work in partnership with the University to promote these as well as the National Student Survey and our own SU survey”, explained Anya Nikolaeva, Vice President Academic Affairs at Regent’s University London Student Union. “The anonymity, especially, means that more students can speak their mind. However, I think these need to be complemented by other approaches where students have the opportunity to make a difference. As one example, we have requested more meetings for our student reps with academics responsible for module content and approach to teaching and learning.”

Lexi Ehresmann, Vice President Education at University of Stirling Students’ Union, said: “Whilst I am personally an advocate of focus groups and other in-person ways to collect feedback which allow the opportunity for follow-up questions, there is no doubt that module evaluation surveys will remain dominant as they are a quick and effective way to reach students.” Aston Students’ Union Vice President (Education) Jawad Ahmad added: “I want to ensure that student voices are heard so closing the feedback loop on module evaluation surveys and other feedback mechanisms is a critical area of development. However, generally we need to build students’ confidence that their voice is appreciated because when they provide feedback, they often do not see the impact.”

The Last Word

Students should be at the centre of their education, and not viewed as metrics in a market. For too long higher education institutions have chased rankings at the expense of true student satisfaction and we need to develop new or more innovative ways of engaging students on the areas of the student experience that matter to them.

In my experience module evaluation surveys, as an important aspect of measuring student satisfaction and engagement, come up more than you think in this discussion. At a national level, these typically end, or mid-module surveys are seen as a key stage in the escalation of student feedback and are a response to the partnership approach that universities pledge. At a local level, they are also being given more prominence, as issues arising from surveys are escalated through the academic representative system, and with many Student Unions (SUs) increasingly running sessions on feedback to explore how course leaders are using it.

Closing the loop is, and has been for a long time, the biggest issue here. When I was a student, I can remember not understanding why I was being asked for my feedback on a module. I did not feel like I saw any tangible change as a result. I was also very wary, as one of just three black students on my course, that my feedback could be easily attributable and fearful that anything negative could be held against me or to my detriment. Universities need to be much clearer on how they act upon module evaluation survey feedback and be more transparent on what they can and cannot do in response.

Students expect to see change as a result of their feedback. In my case, however, I did not feel I could achieve that until I moved into a representative role. There is a glaring lack of consistency in how the sector approaches this and closing the feedback loop. One university responds very differently to another, and that is highly damaging in a world where it is very easy for students to compare institutions' approaches to student partnership. In my eyes, there are two shifts to creating that consistency:

One is that this should be led by SUs, with students themselves shaping part of their futures. Through student voice, there is an opportunity for universities to identify blind spots that may deter the course and education experience, and institutionally this could bring more

opportunity for evolution and breaking down barriers of tradition which can limit innovation. As part of this, an SU-led response could ensure a more informed and more targeted approach to student voice, engaging a wider group of student demographics that is truly representative of how the modern student views education.

The other is universities, the regulator or quality code take the initiative for student engagement to be done well and not as a tick-box exercise. Students need to understand how their feedback has led to change, and in an accessible way. There should be a place for sabbatical officers and course reps to be part of feedback mechanisms and, in effect, whilst there would be partnership activity to make change happen universities should lead.



Whether we follow either approach, or something else entirely, as someone who has grown up in the digital age it is clear that there are many platforms to learn from and if universities do not adapt, they will become outdated. The only way forward is to build a democratised system, one where students have an equal say in shaping their education experience, and as much as Vice-Chancellors and Faculty heads.

Student feedback, including that generated through module evaluation surveys, should be organic, lived and constant. Checkpoints currently set by universities and sector bodies are unnatural, and often cause students to respond in unnatural ways. We need a different way of thinking which sees students continuously involved in the process, moving away from the sense of being 'done to' and not 'done with'. We should also perhaps move from a focus on quantitative to qualitative and give feedback in a multitude of different ways which are shaped and formed with student leaders, ensuring flexibility and changing with the times.

Unless we make students architects of their own education – of which an important part are feedback mechanisms – we will not move forward and will only succeed in further disempowering students rather than meeting the needs of the current and future generations. Students should no longer be seen as passive consumers in the system, instead they should be partners in delivery, and SUs should be at the heart of turning the tide with their highly professional support functions.

To achieve this, partnerships between universities and students which are currently inconsistent need to become more consistent, and students need to be involved in feedback year-on-year. Module evaluation feedback is a hugely valuable component, not least in the academic representative structure, and time needs to be put aside to make sure that student feedback is part of SU workplans across the piece.

Additionally, whilst quality assurance and enhancement must be the target outcome, again the language we use around this must be made more accessible for students to engage with. If this is done in a helpful way, the partnership between students and universities can evolve.



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Explorance helps universities improve teaching and learning through the way they capture, analyse and respond to student feedback. We work with hundreds of higher education institutions around the world, providing solutions for formative feedback (which gives lecturers the opportunity to seek feedback through bespoke, non-standard questions, during a module) and summative evaluation surveys at the end of semester (which provides standardisation on questions enabling comparisons across the institution). The Blue experience management platform is used for end of term and mid-term evaluations and provides a huge amount of valuable quantitative, qualitative and demographic data. Through the Bluepulse continuous listening platform lecturers can engage in feedback and the evaluation of teaching during a module – not just at the end of it. They can ask questions at any time, and students can give feedback at any time. It enables faculty to build teaching and learning strategies that receive a welcome response from students and, because this is done in collaboration with the students, increases participation and engagement.

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