

Engaging student voices via digital feedback platforms: new directions, dilemmas, and affordances

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Abstract

Higher education institutions have adopted multiple tools to engage students' voices on key areas, including teaching, learning opportunities, assessment, and feedback. Concerns about timeliness have meant that the effectiveness of such methods has been questioned. This has prompted the adoption of alternative approaches that can capture student feedback at earlier points in the degree programme. This paper explores how the adoption of the digital feedback platform Unitu, has impacted students' experiences and their interactions with the academic staff. This was accomplished through a mixed method approach using surveys, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups with students and staff. This study indicates that Unitu can provide many affordances for staff and institutional leaders in their scope to surface students' experiences and provide timely responses to students' feedback. The dilemmas that educators must address if they are to continue promoting effective learning experiences through digital feedback platforms are also discussed in this paper.

Keywords: student voice; feedback; higher education; digital technologies; feedback platforms

Introduction

In recent years, approaches to engaging students' voices have grown in prominence within Higher Education (HE) internationally (Lygo-Baker, Kinchin and Winstone 2019; Gravett, Yakovchuk and Kinchin 2020). In a move that offers space for more dialogic conceptions of education, understanding students' experiences is often no longer viewed as a secondary aspect of HE, but as a core foundation of teaching and learning. However, approaches to engaging students' voices are complex and rapidly developing. Moreover, they are also situated within the wider backdrop of the increasing marketisation of the sector (Bottrell and Manathunga 2019), where students are perceived as customers, which raises questions regarding how to foster meaningful relations in HE (Gravett and Winstone 2020). Furthermore, as digital technologies continue to transform the HE sector, offering new spaces for interaction, approaches to engaging student voices continue to be reconfigured in ways that require further understanding.

The focus of this study is to surface the impact of introducing new digital feedback platforms upon feedback interactions within HE. We do this by exploring a specific platform, Unitu, and its implementation. Drawing on data from questionnaires, interviews and focus groups with staff and students, this article builds on the literature attending to the complex topic of student voice, which is defined as “listening to and valuing the views that students express regarding their learning experiences; communicating student views to people who are in a position to influence change; and treating students as equal partners in the evaluation of teaching and learning” (Seale, 2010, p. 995). This article illustrates how digital technologies are changing our engagement with students’ voices in multiple and important ways. Our data show that student voice platforms provide several affordances for encouraging student feedback and enabling staff to respond to students’ concerns. However, dilemmas and challenges remain, in terms of offering further support and guidance to both students and staff, as well as managing students’ expectations of satisfaction whilst offering spaces for meaningful learning to take place.

Engaging student voices and dialogic feedback

Understanding students’ experiences has become a fundamental part of contemporary HE (Lygo-Baker, Kinchin and Winstone 2019). Crucially, engaging students’ voices can become a vital vehicle for change, a way for students to be active agents in transforming the environment in which they learn. Student feedback, according to Harvey (2011), is a key component of continuous improvement and should be integrated into our existing processes through analysis, reporting, action, and dialogue. Harvey defines the two functions of student feedback as: internal, to fuel continuous improvement; and external, to provide information for a public accounting procedure and for prospective students. The findings show that when an institution acts on what has been raised by students, satisfaction rises over time and students are more inclined to stay involved in the learning process (Harvey 2011).

Given the ever-growing significance and volume of student feedback in HE, there have been continuous efforts to investigate new mechanisms for analysing and interpreting data in a quantifiable way (Benton and Cashin 2013). End-of-module evaluation forms and surveys are some of the methods used to collect student feedback. Similarly, the National Student Survey (NSS)¹, as UK-wide official survey, has been adopted by HE institutions to capture students’ feedback on various aspects of their experience at university. However in both instances, data is collected over a predetermined amount of time, and the results are released later, resulting in a disconnect between student voice and action. More recently, there have been several concerns with regards to how the timeliness, frequency, individualisation, and credibility of feedback are used to measure students’ experiences (Su 2022; Ashwin 2021; Darwin 2021; Feldman 2007). The prevalent characteristic in these various mechanisms is the abstraction of the student voice, meaning that it is ‘spoken about’ and ‘spoken for’. It is misrepresented as being a singular voice, rather than being directly heard or engaged in its multiplicity. Darwin (2021) agrees that as student cohorts become more diverse and fragmented, the notion of engaging with an aggregated singular voice, instead of using the individual expressions, becomes more problematic (Fielding 2013; Sabri

¹ <https://www.thestudentsurvey.com/>

2011; Freeman 2016), highlighting the need for a qualitative classification of the student voices.

To better understand the diversity of students' perspectives, discussion forums and meetings with student representatives had been introduced which have proven beneficial (Hayes et al. 2020). Such learning communities can form and prosper with a larger focus on student-staff engagement and can enable students' concerns to be addressed in more timely and agile ways.

It is therefore critical, that students not only express their views, but also understand the avenues through which they can communicate with academic staff, support services, and the university as a whole. This could be done using in-class discussions, emails, surveys, committee representation, discussion forums, and so on. Nonetheless, inadequate feedback, poor feedback methods, and lack of communication between academic staff and students are some of the major obstacles to effective feedback practices (Dawson et al. 2019; Selvaraj and Azman 2020).

In recent years, educators have embraced new means of engaging and connecting with students, such as exploring avenues that capture students' feedback in both quantitative and qualitative ways. Some researchers recommend an investigation into how technology can encourage new modes of discourse (West and Turner 2016; Pitt and Winstone 2020). This is also reflected in research conducted during the pandemic (Ahmed and Opoku 2021; Christopoulos and Sprangers 2021), where educational institutions extensively relied on digital platforms for all activities, including student-staff interactions. Other researchers, for example Mayhew (2019), explore how using specific recent technologies such as digital feedback platforms can support effective consultation and ongoing student-staff dialogue. Building on this literature, this paper engages empirical data to consider how the adoption of a digital feedback platform, Unitu, has impacted students' experiences and dialogic interactions with academic staff. For the purposes of this study, the authors opted for evaluating the platform adopted by the institution and are interested in evaluating how students' feedback about their learning experiences may be communicated to their tutors, and how feedback dialogues may be created. Specifically, we expand upon the existing research to evaluate the potential impact of digital feedback platforms, and the kinds of interactions such platforms create, upon student-staff relationships in HE.

Student voice platforms and Unitu

Unitu² is a student voice platform with a structured web-based interface that allows students and academic staff to collectively raise, discuss, and resolve issues. Researchers including Mayhew (2019) have begun to explore how this feedback platform improves student representation in departmental and university-wide discussions by facilitating contacts between the academic community and the students, which might help students feel heard. When using Unitu, students can ask questions, raise issues, and provide ideas that can then be reinforced by their peers. These might relate to any aspect of a student's learning experience without restricting

² Unitu is a "platform that helps universities and SU's collect, act and analyse student feedback all in real-time." (Unitu 2023)

it to instructor- or module-related concerns. This generates an open network of positive and negative viewpoints, with the most popular posts being processed further. The student course representatives have the responsibility of escalating the feedback to the attention of staff, who can resolve any queries and post constructive feedback. Throughout this article, student comments and remarks on the platform are referred to as 'feedback posts', whilst staff input is referred to as 'staff responses' and 'resolutions'. When the word 'feedback' is used alone, it refers to the student voice and the general feedback consensus.

To better understand how the digital feedback platform, Unitu, has been used and its potential impact on the students' experiences, this paper aims to answer the following questions:

- What were the opportunities and challenges of introducing a new digital feedback platform?
- What was the impact on student learning experiences?
- What was the impact on staff engagement with students?
- What type of relationships/rapport did this platform facilitate?
- What insights and implications can our study offer for other educators' understanding of digital feedback platforms?

Methodology

Setting

This study took place at a HE Institution in the South of England. At this institution, the platform was introduced in 2021. During the platform's first year of operation, students from all disciplines, both undergraduate and postgraduate, were encouraged to activate their accounts in efforts to have their voices heard by the academic community. Central university communications were sent out to all students, outlining the platform, its goals, and the key features it offers. Selected members of staff were also invited to activate their accounts and use Unitu to collect and act on student feedback. These staff members included senior staff across disciplines, including Heads of Department, Heads of Teaching and Academic Technologies, Directors of Learning and Teaching, alongside support staff from academic departments and staff from the Students' Union. This approach provided a direct conduit for those involved in effecting changes to access the student feedback.

Across all disciplines within the University, 36% of the student cohort activated their Unitu account in the first year of rollout, and continuous communications were made to encourage more students to register in following years.

Procedure

The study employed a sequential mixed approach using surveys, semi-structured interviews, and focus groups with students and staff. Ethical approval was diligently sought and successfully obtained. This mixed strategy has proven to be a useful method enabling different approaches to supplement and add depth to one another

(Chan et al. 2017), particularly when surveys reveal concerns that need to be addressed through open-ended semi-structured interviews (Creswell and Creswell 2003). Survey data was enriched using further follow up focus groups and interviews, to provide an additional opportunity to draw out initial themes. The adoption of this strategy aids in uncovering previously unknown aspects of participant behaviour as well as their subjective perceptions (Adams 2015).

Over the course of three months (June – August 2021), students and staff were provided with online questionnaires that allowed them to reflect on their experiences and provide comments. There were 30 questions in total, with a combination of Likert scale, multiple-choice, and open questions that enabled participants to submit free-form comments. This enabled participants to provide their own opinion in the other-response option as well as more detailed and honest responses where appropriate. The questions were piloted first, and more items were added based on frequent responses in the other-response option. Participants were informed that the completion of the questionnaire was completely optional, and were invited to complete it online, in their own time, following an instructions page on the purpose and structure of the questionnaire.

Using the core themes discerned from the questionnaires, interviews and focus groups were conducted with staff members and students from different disciplines and schools. These were conducted over the duration of a month (August and December 2021 respectively). According to other researchers (Kidd and Parshall 2000), the interpersonal and interactive aspect of focus groups allows the capturing of information that could not be obtained from a single participant and can aid the generation of a broader range of opinions and ideas than individual techniques could capture. Thus, participants, in both types of sessions, were encouraged to participate in discussions that included both guided and open questions to allow them to further clarify their points of view and individual experiences. The invited participants were provided with an information document with instructions on how the research would be conducted and how their data will be processed, as well as assurances that their anonymity would be maintained throughout the project and in any published work. Participants signed consent forms indicating their willingness to participate in the interviews and their consent for the discussions to be recorded and transcribed.

Student Questionnaires

The questionnaire was aimed at all students at the university from across different disciplines and levels. Its purpose was to understand how the Unitu platform is used and to analyse the experiences of students who participate in the process. The questions were categorised into four groups to aid in better understanding the students' experiences and perspectives on whether the platform was effective in capturing and resolving their feedback: familiarity and confidence with online platforms, introduction to the online platform and provision of guidelines, day-to-day use of the platform and its impact on their learning experiences and engagement.

Staff Questionnaires

Staff members were asked similar questions to those asked of students to allow for direct analysis of the many viewpoints and uses of the platform. The purpose of the questionnaire was to understand how the Unitu platform was being used and examine the experiences of staff members who are responsible for monitoring and managing student feedback. Closed and open-ended questions were posed to capture staff members' perspectives on whether learning and teaching dialogue via Unitu improves student engagement, with a focus on the platform's effectiveness in recording student feedback and generating transparent student-staff interactions.

Staff Interviews

The interviews were conducted over the course of an hour. It was critical to capture participants' perspectives on the topic, to highlight any major drawbacks of the current feedback processes and suggest possible improvements.

Student Focus groups

The focus groups lasted an hour and included direct dialogue and debates with the student participants, which enabled the capturing of the student voice beyond its singularity (Sabri 2011). These groups of participants included students who had previously completed the online questionnaire and some who had not; thus, providing additional heterogeneity in the data.

Participants

Participants were recruited via research calls for participation and personalised email invites. This approach to participant recruitment aimed to gather data from a wide range of perspectives and sources, contributing to the richness and comprehensiveness of the findings.

More specifically, participants for the student and staff questionnaires were recruited via the research call. Separate calls were made for each group, with contact information for participants to use if they had any concerns or needed clarification. Staff interviews, on the other hand, targeted specific participants based on their roles and access to Unitu, who were deemed to have valuable insights that could significantly contribute to the study. Lastly, for the focus groups with students, participants were invited by the Students Union through a University-wide call for contribution. The Students Union played a key role in selecting students from various disciplines and levels to ensure diversity in the data.

Student Questionnaires

A total of 118 students completed the anonymous questionnaire. More specifically, 13% Arts and Humanities, 21% Health and Medical Sciences, 21% Social Sciences, 32% STEM (Science Technology Engineering and Maths), and 13% Other, completed

the questionnaire; with 94% of those being undergraduate students and 6% postgraduate students.

Staff Questionnaires

A total of 50 staff members completed the anonymous questionnaire and the open-ended comments surfaced some insightful themes. The group of participants comprised academics from the following discipline areas: 9% Arts and Humanities, 13% Health and Medical Sciences, 24% Social Sciences, 43% STEM, 11% Other. Of those completions, 51% were categorised as academic administration, 30% academic staff, 5% research staff, and 14% professional services and support staff.

Staff Interviews

A total of 8 interviews were conducted which comprised of staff members from various disciplines (13% Arts and Humanities, 13% in Health and Medical Sciences, 25% Social Sciences, 38% STEM, and 13% Other) and levels.

Student Focus Groups

A total of 20 students were split equally over 4 focus group sessions. More specifically, 35% Social Sciences, 20% STEM, 20% Arts and Humanities, and 25% in Health and Medical Sciences, and comprised of 85% Undergraduate and 15% Postgraduate students.

Data Analysis

First, the data obtained from the questionnaires was evaluated through quantitative data analysis techniques to determine the participants' opinions and attitudes. Percentages were used to provide a quantitative summary of the Binary and Likert scale questions, allowing the identification of the bigger picture, while thematic analysis was used to analyse open-ended questions, allowing for a more detailed interpretation of the complex perspectives of the participants.

Thematic analysis, a common qualitative data analysis approach, was also applied to analyse the open-ended questions in the transcribed data from the interviews and focus groups, which allowed for a complex picture of the situation to be captured and summarised in coherent conclusions. This method, following Braun and Clarke (2006), is a strategy for identifying, analysing, and interpreting themes in qualitative data that is not constrained by theoretical limitations. A qualitative theme analysis was used to analyse the free text question findings, and the results were then contextualised considering the study's objectives. This was attained by first becoming familiar with the raw data and investigating any potential similarities and relationships. Any text pertinent to the research question was highlighted and extracted from the remaining data. Using open coding, a descriptive label was applied to the extracted text (Braun and Clarke 2006). Data was collated, organised into groups according to their labels which displayed broad themes. Given the considerable overlap of some of those themes, the initial labels were re-evaluated through an iterative process.

The findings from the questionnaires, interviews and focus groups were then integrated in a systematic approach and collectively analysed to promote the emergence of more meaningful themes and support the drawing of specific conclusions. This was accomplished by looking for patterns, correlations and contradictions between the themes and the quantitative findings, as well as examining how the qualitative data enriched or complemented the quantitative.

Findings

The primary aim of this study was to gain insight into how digital feedback platforms are being adopted in HE, and the affordances and impact of such approaches to engaging students' voices. Our data surfaced five themes: (1) timing of collecting feedback; (2) role of anonymity; (3) student-staff relationships; (4) dialogic feedback and the feeling of speaking to the void; and (5) the need for additional support and guidance.

Theme 1: Timing of feedback collection

A clear theme in our data related to students' expectations regarding the timeliness of their feedback posts being actioned. For students, their expectations regarding response times to feedback posts were often not met. For example, students reported that:

I received no feedback from the post despite it being up for a significant time (Student A)

Some lecturers take a longer time to reply (Student B)

It often felt like the lecturers did not actually take the feedback seriously. The time that it took for a piece of feedback to be considered and/or implemented was extremely long and by the time something was done, the issue had either escalated or become irrelevant (Student C)

Although student participants noted that a resolution was sometimes successfully shared on the platform, they felt that the proposed approach fell short of their expectations. There is clearly a mismatch here between students' expectations and staff members' ability to resolve the concern raised. This may be due to the issue being beyond the staff member's control, or it may be due to time or resources. As one participant commented:

The time limit to reply to queries puts a lot of pressure on the staff and means they are not able to succeed in resolving the issue opened in such a short time span (Student D)

As we see from this comment, student participants did recognise the importance of alleviating some of the strain from staff by allowing sufficient time for feedback to be resolved in a constructive manner, which may entail further discussions with the students on and off the platform.

For staff members, the data revealed that the majority of the staff used Unitu on a regular basis with the aim to provide timely resolutions to students' comments (69%

one or more occurrences in a week, 22% once a month, 3% once a semester, 6% varies). As one staff member explained:

We have a rota for responding. I access every day and spend about an hour a day when I am on-rota. When I am off-rota I look every week or so (Staff member A)

It was evident that staff members felt that the platform had been effective in capturing the students' thoughts in a timely manner.

Unitu is a good platform and has a lot of potential in effectively capturing the students' feedback, [...] we were able to fix quickly, and the students thanked us for being responsive, but changes are needed. [...] (Staff member B)

However, concerns were raised on how the platform is being used, and how the students' expectations of the platform compare to its intended purpose. For example:

The platform [...] empowers students to provide feedback easily and quickly, but there is an anger that students feel and some struggle to understand why we can't always do as they ask (Staff member C)

28% of the staff participants further expressed that their experience with the platform was impacted by the lack of sufficient time to deal with the incoming feedback posts, and the inability to further discuss the concerns with the students prior to reaching a mutually agreed resolution. For example, one member of staff responded:

The system should be updated to work with response times in terms of working days (Staff member D)

As a result, there were some irregularities in the time it took to propose and adopt resolutions, and some of the resolutions submitted were unsatisfactory to some of the students.

It was taking a huge amount of time – adding layers of unnecessary admin between students and deliverers, while increasing student expectations and providing an 'echo chamber' for a small number of disgruntled students (Staff member E)

On the surface, the Unitu platform offers the means in which to act upon feedback posts promptly, and to show these interactions transparently. As one staff member explained:

The platform allows the University to be more transparent about actions taken in response to feedback (Staff member B)

However, the experiences of staff and students reported here suggest that barriers were surfaced that were hindering the effective adoption of Unitu in terms of students' expectations of staff ability to respond, as well as the lack of opportunities for meaningful dialogic interaction.

Theme 2: The role of anonymity in offering a sense of safety for students

The anonymity afforded by the Unitu platform was also a significant theme within the data. Many students responded that the ability to feedback anonymously had affected

their decision to engage with the platform.

As stated above, during the first year of using Unitu, students found the anonymity of posts to be a popular feature, with 78% of all student feedback, given across all disciplines, using this feature. This was also supported by our student questionnaires and focus groups, with 80% of respondents agreeing that the anonymity of feedback submissions influenced their decision to use the platform. The importance of anonymity was also highlighted by students, who explained how it influenced their decision to share their feedback on this digital platform, as well as their subsequent engagement.

Anonymity can reassure students there will not be consequences for voicing opposing opinions to the department or for asking for change (Student A)

I think anonymised comments make people feel more confident in vocalising their opinions (Student B)

The option to post anonymously was also considered as a measure for creating a safer space for students. According to the findings, anonymity allowed students to express genuine emotions, report concerns, and make both negative and constructive suggestions on how their university experience could be improved.

However, students also highlighted that the anonymity may come with some drawbacks and was described as a “double-edged sword”:

I like to post with my name, but I think the ability to write anonymously has given more people opportunities to share their opinion. However, it is a double-edged sword: some people feel free to write negatively and cruelly under the blanket of anonymity [...] (Student C)

The tone, especially of the anonymised posts is often overtly negative (Student D)

It has led to me avoiding the platform as anonymous comments seem to result in a negative / non-constructive approach (Student E)

Anonymity, then, can foster unhelpful behaviours. Similarly, staff members spoke about the affordances of the ability to engage anonymously, and how anonymity may encourage increased participation with the platform because it allows students to express themselves freely:

People are often much more comfortable sharing views anonymously, which Unitu is great for (Staff member A)

And yet, it was also evident that there were a lot of concerning factors with this feature:

It is difficult to manage student expectations in a platform like Unitu in a constructive and supporting way. The social media-esque design of the platform sets the expectation that responses will be instant. If it is to be retained, the function of anonymity should be removed (Staff member B)

Students feel confident to post as they can do it anonymously, however it seems to have removed the relationship between the lecturer and the students (Staff member C)

Because feedback is anonymous some students adopt an unhelpful and sometimes rude tone. This can be very upsetting for staff. There is also a danger that other students read poor feedback from some students and start to think unfavourably about their own experience (Staff member D)

I really believe that in-person and open dialogue between staff and students is what we need (Staff member D)

The function that allows students to post anonymously is not useful in resolving complex issues which require dialogue rather than written messages (Staff member A)

While students and staff highlighted the benefits of anonymous contributions and how this feature might help create a safer environment where students can openly voice their concerns, at the same time, participants recognised that this feature on the platform has certain drawbacks. These include making students feel uneasy owing to the language and tone used in anonymous posts, as well as causing staff anxiety. The anonymous interactions were also perceived as lacking the benefits of in-person and open dialogue. As one staff member further explained:

My own experience in terms of how students have used the platform has been extremely negative [...] allowing students to have a platform where they can state everything that makes them unhappy in an anonymous way is really problematic - it is not allowing them to take responsibility for their own actions and words (Staff member B)

Theme 3: The change of student-staff relationships and the distance created

One of the themes surfaced in our data was the impact of the digital feedback platform upon student-staff interactions. Students explained that they did not perceive Unitu to be a space for developing relationships or meaningful interactions with academic staff:

I wouldn't expect it to have an impact on the relationships, mostly because its anonymous. I don't think that's a bad thing though. To me, that isn't what the platform is for (Student A)

I wouldn't consider it a tool of building relationships with the lecturers (Student B)

I don't feel that this platform helps build relationships between staff and students, I feel it makes interactions more impersonal and adds a barrier in this way (Student E)

However, students further explained that they were interested in building a positive and inclusive environment where both students and staff could work collaboratively:

I enjoy engaging and fostering a relationship with my lecturers on a one-to-one basis. I feel like raising feedback in that way allows me to grow a better connection with lecturers than online via an (optionally) anonymised platform (Student C)

I would like to build a safe environment when both lecturers and students feel listened to and respected (Student D)

ideally a relationship where both party is comfortable enough to raises issues when needed and not feeling a sense of pressure to do so (Student F)

Similar views were also expressed by staff. As one of the staff members explained:

There is a clear dichotomous power dynamic on Unitu. It emphasises the difference between students and staff, rather than reinforcing that staff and students have the same end goals to collaborate towards (Staff member A)

Other members of the staff community, highlighted that this “dichotomous power dynamic” has impacted the relationships between students and staff:

The most successful staff-student relationships I have seen involve face-to-face meetings where students are invited to collaborate on the co-design of their learning (Staff member B)

Customer like relationships, where the person raising an issue expects the issue to be resolved in the way they want (Staff member C)

more important to build genuine, constructive, interpersonal relationships between staff and students. (Staff member D)

This comparison of student and staff responses highlights how their perspectives are closely in alignment. Due to the nature of the platform being online, there is limited contact between staff and students which leads to misunderstandings, miscommunications, and the deterioration of student-staff relationships.

Theme 4: Dialogic feedback and the feeling of speaking to the void

Likewise, a further theme highlighted specifically the role of dialogue and how this might happen via a digital feedback platform. According to the findings, 86.9% of student participants agree that an effective feedback system should focus on active engagement and communication between staff and students, and out of those 67.7% felt that an online feedback platform, such as Unitu, should help students and staff to build a sense of community. Students further explained that:

[...] more than ever, we needed a dialogue with them to constantly improve delivery of online modules. I think Unitu was a good platform for this (Student A)

I would like to build a mutually respectful dialogue on Unitu where the lecturers can also give feedback on how they think the class is engaging - i.e., a poor attendance etc to keep students accountable instead of a mere onslaught of students. It needs to be a two-way relationship where both parties feel the other is invested in them (Student B)

Despite the attempts to have meaningful dialogues on the platform, it was evident that further work was needed to ensure that students were heard and that they had the opportunity to freely discuss their issues with the academic community. 59.5% of the students that took part in the study mentioned that there was a preference to interact

with their lecturers directly and discuss their concerns, despite first initiating a feedback post on Unitu, highlighting the importance of dialogue. They further explained that:

Conversations no longer take place casually after lectures, concerns have to be raised through Unitu or email. This impacts what concerns are raised as small problems can be taken out of proportion or aren't worth raising on such a platform. Thus, these issues are either left to fester into larger issues or not raised at all. (Student C)

The students in the study highlighted how much they value the opportunity to speak with their lecturers. The findings from our staff participants corroborated this. An effective feedback system, according to 85.7%, focuses on the active engagement and communication between staff and students. The inability to meet with students to discuss feedback was cited by 19% as a barrier that has hampered their experience with the platform.

The function that allows students to post anonymously is not useful in resolving complex issues which require dialogue rather than written messages (Staff member A)

Having an open dialogue with students and speaking with them regularly about issues [...] is the best way to ensure that students are satisfied. (Staff member B)

In many cases, having a follow-up conversation help clarify the issue and it would be easier to collectively find a solution with the students [...] (Staff member C)

A staff member also explained that “despite replying to the students concerns it feels that we are talking to the void. Students may not see the resolution or may not be satisfied with the proposed solution.”. They continued by proposing that the “platform should allow for conversations to take place between the staff and students before a solution is proposed.”.

Participants recognised the value of individual and group discussions between students and staff, and agree that, despite its numerous advantages, the digital feedback platform should not be used to replace existing processes, but rather as part of a collection of mechanisms that work together to capture students' voices:

I think that having a designated feedback platform is extremely useful for collecting feedback for students and lecturers to access and review. However, I also feel that it puts some stress on students and lecturers to only give and answer feedback on that specific platform and feel that is inadequate communication between students and staff (Student A)

Theme 5: The need for additional support and guidance

Another theme was the need for additional support and guidance in using Unitu. Despite the opportunities for training offered by the University, 70% of the students mentioned that they received no training or supporting material in how to use the platform, which had impacted their experience. Students explained that training was mainly offered to student course representatives. This indicated that the provision of

training opportunities was not universally accessed and thus the students' experiences differed:

Since I was a Course Rep, I received online training from the Student Union on how to use the platform and the appropriate next steps for dealing with complaints/praises/ideas (Student A)

We had a student come into our tutorial to explain how the platform works [...] (Student B)

I think training on Unitu, would encourage more people to use it (Student C)

On the contrary, 76% of the staff participants mentioned that they received some supporting material in how to use the platform. However, 10% of those further explained that the amount of support could have been increased as their lack of confidence with the technology, as well as that of the students, had a negative impact on their experience with the platform.

Lack of knowledge and training [...] One hour training session from the Unitu team (Staff member A)

More training for students. Only high level [...] and quite generic (Staff member B)

The advantages of student training were addressed, as well as how this could improve traditional approaches for capturing student feedback:

I would like to see something much more collegiate. Through some training to encourage professional language among students and a professional approach to staff. (Staff member C)

Hopefully if students can be trained more appropriately on how to use this it will streamline the Staff-Student Liaison Committee meetings (Staff member D)

Participants emphasised the necessity of having further training and support on how to utilise the platform, particularly for students who may not have had the opportunity to do so owing to them not being course representatives. The varying training opportunities implemented seems to have caused confusion for both students and staff trying to navigate through the platform. It is evidenced that further work is required to ensure consistency of training in the use of the technology, as well as timely and well-targeted communication.

Discussion

In this article, we have examined student and staff perceptions of a digital feedback platform, Unitu, emphasising significant factors that may have influenced their experiences. Our findings show the difficulty of comprehending the students' experiences as well as the nuanced impact of the tools which we employ to do so. Our

data show that student voice platforms can offer multiple affordances for educators and institutional leaders in their scope to surface students' experiences and to offer timely responses to students' feedback. However, there are also a number of challenges that will need to be considered if educators are to continue to be able to foster meaningful, dialogic, learning experiences.

As many universities recently transitioned to hybrid teaching and learning, the introduction of digital feedback platforms can be seen to offer a valuable and effective adjunct to traditional approaches for capturing student feedback. In this study, Unitu's web-based structure enabled students to quickly construct virtual communities amongst their peers, engage in discussions, have their voices heard, and establish bonds. While this dynamic was partly observed in the academic community. Nonetheless, it is imperative to recognise that conventional, face-to-face interactions retain considerable potency and are the favoured modality for many students.

The platform's structure enabled students to share feedback, concerns, and suggestions without feeling restricted to do so at specific times within the year as is with the student-staff liaison committee meetings. Moreover, the availability of both peer and staff feedback/responses made these interactions more transparent to all involved. These findings build upon the work from other researchers, who addressed the significance of receiving feedback promptly and acting on it in a timely manner, which, while time-consuming, is paramount to the students' experiences. Harvey (2011) discussed how students are more inclined to stay engaged in the learning process, when the institution acts on their raised concerns. Despite this, student and staff participants reported that barriers arose that hampered the effective adoption of the platform. Students expressed worry over discrepancies in the time it took to propose and adopt resolutions, as well as how some of those resolutions were unsatisfactory. Examples showed that resolutions were expected immediately by students, but that staff did not have the autonomy to answer some of the queries as they were not within their immediate control. More time and discussion were required, according to staff members, to ensure that resolutions were feasible to implement and suitable to the problem at hand. Concerns were also expressed about the numerous feedback posts and the amount of time spent on the platform by staff resulting in wellbeing concerns. Similar concerns were raised in Mayhew's (2019) work. Despite stressing how digital feedback platforms can encourage student-staff interactions, she emphasised how establishing clear norms of interaction and managing student expectations could maximise the dialogic approach for everyone on the platform and minimise such problems.

One of the platform's most popular features was the ability for students to leave anonymous feedback. Anonymous posting had been widely exercised with 78% of all posts shared on the platform in the first year. This has been useful in obtaining feedback from students who would not otherwise have expressed their concerns. Some have described this as 'impersonal,' however this impersonal aspect of the platform empowered students, to communicate their feedback, by overcoming possible communication barriers and cultural preconceptions. Data from student participants shows that anonymity positively affected their decision to adopt and engage with the platform. This resonates with the work from Medina et al. (2019) which demonstrate the intrinsic value of enabling students to express their views free from identity connotations. While both students and staff participants highlighted some of

the benefits of anonymous contributions, they also acknowledged that this feature had certain disadvantages. It was highlighted that the platform's resemblance to social media platforms has influenced the language and tone used by students. The anonymity supported by the online platform created an environment where dialogue could give rise to unacceptable behaviour that emotionally affected members of staff and students. Participants expressed that some guidelines on how to communicate professionally when using the platform may support the creation of a safer space for all involved.

The anonymous interactions were also perceived as lacking the benefits of in-person engagement and open dialogue. This resonates with Scanlon et al (2007) and Gravett and Winstone (2020) findings that students feel 'lost' and unable to form meaningful connections. This is a result of the 'distance' that is created between students and staff due to the students' perception of their anonymity in a large cohort, which is comparable to the interactions on Unitu. Participants discussed how an essential part is creating an equitable, socially just, and safe learning environment that enables constructive dialogue between students and staff. This includes the participation of both parties on the platform, and their contribution to healthy conversations on how to address and resolve feedback. However, owing to the anonymity feature, both students and staff were unable to debate or clarify the feedback post which may have further exacerbated their experiences with the platform.

Participants explained that further support, training, and advice could be beneficial in the smoother adoption of future usage of the platform and its consolidation for existing users. This may be embedded in specific points throughout the year – for example induction processes – to maximise the effectiveness of the training and the users' technological self-efficacy. This aims to raise awareness of when students and staff may undertake this training. Furthermore, the data revealed the need for consistent communication and training to ensure that the platform is used in a professional and responsible way, whilst creating a safe space and symbiotic relationships for all participants.

Despite Unitu's many valuable features, both students and staff participants agreed that additional efforts are needed to clarify the use of the platform alongside traditional feedback processes, when and how to use it. Students now have a plethora of ways to provide feedback to the academic community, including digital platforms, staff-student liaison committees, module evaluation questionnaires, discussion fora within a virtual learning environment, chat discussions on messaging systems as well as face-to-face contact with academic staff. The study showed that Unitu was one element within the institution's feedback eco-system, and it was not clear to students whether it had replaced the traditional processes or coexisted with them. This insight is already being recognised within the literature which highlights:

the value in recognising both the breadth and depth of the student voice in its multiple forms. For example, student teaching feedback systems which are meant to be "feedback" are only one point that help faculty triangulate the shifting centre of what constitutes excellent learning and teaching. When thoughtfully contextualised, this particular student voice has legitimacy and weight and must not be misinterpreted (Warburton 2019, vi).

Limitations/Challenges

There are a number of limitations to this study that must be acknowledged, and that offer the potential for further research. This study offers a key contribution through its examination of an underexplored area; however, this is limited due to taking place within a single institution. Further research in additional contexts would therefore enhance our understanding of this developing area. The research explored the use of a single digital feedback platform, Unitu. It would therefore be useful to consider how the differing design of other digital feedback platforms resonated or conflicted with the experiences of staff and students using Unitu.

Conclusion

Engaging with students' voices in a timely manner has become increasingly important in recent years. The main goal of this study was to build and expand upon the existing literature, in order to explore how the adoption of the digital feedback platform, Unitu, has impacted students' experiences, dialogic interactions, as well as their relationships with academic staff. It addresses a rapidly evolving area of student engagement and feedback practices that holds potential to change the ways in which students and staff interact, and experience higher education. Our findings suggest that Unitu has had a positive impact on students' and staff' experiences, encouraging new spaces for communication. The data also revealed that further work is required to promote meaningful conversations and dialogue, between students and staff. We suggest that institutions adopt a more holistic approach to understand the impact of digital platforms, how they operate alongside other opportunities for student-staff interactions and how they can be managed effectively to enhance students' experiences. Our study offers insights for other educators seeking to implement and evaluate digital feedback platforms, as well as for all staff interested in understanding and fostering meaningful feedback practices and student engagement in higher education.

Disclosure statement

No potential competing interest was reported by the authors.

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