Faculty of Science and Engineering

Faculty Forum – Virtual Learning Environment and Student Voice

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Compiled by Raheel Ansari (Students' Union Faculty of Science and Engineering Officer) and Ausrine Naujalyte (Students' Union Education Coordinator for Faculty of Science and Engineering)

Executive summary

The Faculty of Science and Engineering's (FSE) Faculty Forum aimed to provide students with the opportunity to feedback on their experience with the Central Learning Environment (CLE)/Blackboard and Student Voice. These topics were chosen by the Students' Union and Faculty as it's very important to get student feedback on the VLE as the University will move to a new system in 2025 (Canvas). Additionally, student voice remains a concern in this year's NSS and SU's research (Build your MCR 2023). This report analyses the feedback from around 40 participants (most of which were student reps) and provides recommendations for both the Faculty and the Students' Union.

Recommendations

The following list is a summary of the recommendations that are provided in the Results section in which the recommendations are described in more detail.

Rep training

- More detailed training about Student-Staff Liaison Committees (SSLCs)
    - More information about how they are run, what is expected from students and staff.
    - More 'behind the scenes' how university works things to help reps know where they realistically can make change.
- Staff training/resources about SSLCs, reps, and their recruitment
    - Making sure staff have the most up-to-date information about the processes and what is expected from them.
    - Students have expressed the feeling that not all staff welcomes their feedback, therefore it's important to address this issue in the staff resources in a constructive and helpful way.
- Rep conduct training
    - Key part of the rep training should be making sure students know how they should act in SSLCs and how to present feedback in a professional and respectful manner.

More ways to give feedback

- Informal ways to give feedback
- Mid semester survey

Reps in Welcome/Freshers

- Better presence of reps in first year/semester
    - Including a formal rep introduction, which would ensure that students know who their academic reps are.

Feedback loops

- Commitment to feedback loops

- Ensuring students know about the actions that stem from their feedback, such as 'You said, we did'.
- Making sure the feedback and the actions related to the student voice are timely.
- Involving students in planning student voice initiatives and making sure they have a say in what happens in their school or faculty.

Sense of belonging

- Creating more opportunities for students to meet students from different years which would improve sense of belonging and create a bridge between the different year groups.

Student communications

- Better communications about student voice initiatives
- Better promotion of SU Exec roles and what they do
- Better promotion of student representatives and their work.

Introduction

On November 22nd, the faculty forums convened at Engineering Building A, drawing around 40 students and staff. The session was divided into two main segments.

Firstly, the Assessment Toolkit was introduced, addressing questions such as the purpose behind its development, its nature, and how students could actively contribute. Following the presentation, students were encouraged to pose questions and seek clarifications.

The second part of the forum focused on two key areas:

The new Virtual Learning Environment (VLE): Daniel Jagger, the eLearning Manager, presented the new VLE, Canvas, highlighting its distinctions from Blackboard. Students engaged in discussions, posing questions and suggesting changes to improve their experience with the new VLE.

Student Voice: Delving into the definition of student voice, attendees participated in breakout sessions to share instances of positive and negative experiences. They also brainstormed solutions to enhance the overall student voice.

Methodology

This portion of the Faculty Forum focused on Student voice and communications related to the student voice. It included 4 activities on student voice in general and 2 questions on student voice in communications. The results section includes the summaries of answers to each of the questions with some analysis, and where possible, a list of recommendations. All the recommendations are also summarised in the next section for easy access.

Results

1. Student voice definition

In the beginning, as a warm-up task, we asked the participants to define what student voice means to them. This was done in order for the students to participate in the making of a joint understanding of student voice and to flag if anything that was mentioned falls beyond the scope of student voice.

All responses were relevant to the definition and, importantly, highlighted that student voice needs to have influence – if actions are not taken, it's not fully student voice. Additionally, making sure that

was students say is useful and meaningful is also part of student voice, which was highlighted by the definitions provided by the participants.

Some examples include:

'The ability of students to have a meaningful say in what goes on in their course, department, school, faculty, and university.'

'Having the bridge between students and lecturers being formed so their perspectives are known'

'When your opinions are not only heard but managed and dealt with. if they're heard but no one acknowledges them it is basically useless nevertheless of who's heard it. an impact must be made.'

'That everyone has a chance to raise their opinion about something and they can do that in a space where other people can support them'

'Allowing honest and unbiased communication between the student body and the faculty'

2. Effectiveness of student voice methods

To what extent do you agree or disagree that the following forms of feedback are effective in implementing changes:
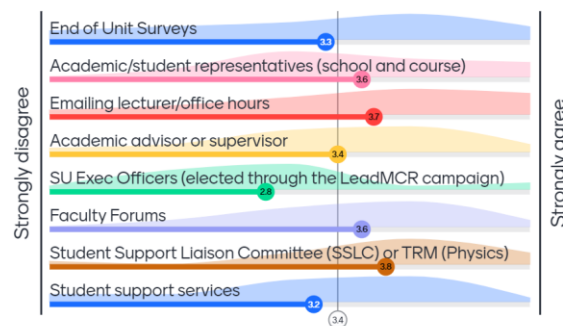
This section and section 6 (Clarity of student voice related communications) both used a scale from Strongly disagree to Strongly agree that was converted to numerical answers (Strongly disagree being 0 and Strongly agree being 10).

Participants rated the Student-Staff Liaison Committees (SSLCs) as the most effective method of implementing changes (7.6/10), followed by emailing lecturers and attending office hours (7.4/10). Participants also rated Academic representatives and Faculty forums quite highly (7.2/10). Academic advisors and supervisors were rated 6.8/10 which was an average rating for this task.

End of unit surveys (6.6/10) and student support services (6.4/10) were rated a bit lower in terms of how effective they are at implementing changes, and SU Exec officers were rated the lowest with 5.6/10.

3. Positive aspects of the student experience
- Student-Staff Liaison Committees (SSLCs)
- Support (professional) and teaching staff
- Unit end questionnaires

Student-Staff Liaison Committees (SSLCs) were described as good place to give feedback. In some courses, the reps have a lot of say in the agenda.

Support and teaching staff were mentioned as very helpful. School of Natural Sciences (SoNS) Support Hub and Doctoral Academy were named by the participants as helpful and supportive. Year Tutor, lab managers and some supervisors were mentioned as well as helpful and staff that listens to student feedback. One student mentioned that finding a friendly teacher or advisor is really important and impactful in their studies.

One comment was made about Unit end questionnaires (UEQs) – they said that if the changes are made, the UEQs are useful.

4. Negative aspects of the student voice experience

- Feedback loops
- IT
- SSLCs
- No informal ways to give feedback
- Hard to get student feedback

5 comments were made about the feedback loop not being closed. Students have noted that sometimes there is no communication from staff about the outcomes of the SSLCs and sometimes they don't feel heard. Several comments were suggesting that doing 'You said, we did' would help with this. One student mentioned that sometimes there is an insufficient explanation of justification of feedback, both from students (in terms of the issues) and the staff (in terms of the response).

Some comments were made about University's IT services and online systems, including Eduroam, MyManchester, e-Prog and the UoM IT services. Participants mentioned that sometimes these services are down or do not work properly. Some students noted that they miss MyManchester and they would like it to be available again. One student mentioned that some questions asked on e-Prog might not useful.

2 students mentioned that SSLCs can bring negative experiences. One noted that in some cases, staff might disregard student feedback. A rep mentioned that SSLCs can be overwhelming as a first year because of the influx of the information.

2 reps noted that they experience a lack of responses from students and sometimes students are not willing to provide feedback which means it is difficult to bring up issues in SSLCs.

Recommendations

- More detailed training about SSLCs
- Staff training/resources about SSLCs
- Informal ways to give feedback
- Better presence of reps in first year/semester and informal ways to give feedback
- Widely used 'You said, we did' framework.

5. Improvements to student voice experience

This section was divided into to columns – Main and Other improvements to student voice, in order for students to prioritise and think of the most important changes that need to be made and secondary ones. For analysis, we analysed both of these columns together but we highlight which ones were the Main ones where useful.

Improvements to the student voice experience:

- More ways to feedback, including the mid-semester survey
- Teaching staff welcoming the student feedback
- Better communications about student voice initiatives
- Other important ways student voice can be improved:
  - timeliness of feedback and actions
  - meeting students from other years to help with sense of belonging
  - improving the feedback loop,
  - include more 'behind the scenes' how university works things to help reps
  - formal rep introduction
  - building access hours
  - involving students in planning student voice initiatives

Most frequently mentioned way to improve the student voice at University, is to have more ways to feedback. Participants mentioned mid-semester surveys (2 comments), better developed UEQs (2 comments), informal ways to get feedback (1 comment) and more feedback forms in general (1 comment) as important ways to get more student feedback. When students were asked to distinguish between most important and other improvements, most frequently mentioned main way of improving the experience was to have more surveys or some comment about those surveys. Therefore, it is key to take this feedback into consideration.

Additionally, students would like to know, that teaching staff will welcome their feedback (3 comments). Participants have reported that staff does not always take the feedback into consideration which demotivates the reps. It seems that more resource to staff about the benefits of student voice might be useful. Additionally, we think that making sure that the way the feedback is given is also important – therefore we recommend additional resources not only to staff, but also for students. For example, student rep training should include a section on conduct and presentation of feedback. This way, we can make sure that both staff and students are respectful of each other and work together to achieve the best results possible.

Participants also noted that they would like better communication methods (2 comments). They would like to not only be communicated via social media but that all essential information is sent directly and in a variety of ways.

Other improvements students mentioned include the following:

- Making sure the feedback and the actions related to the student voice are timely.
- Creating more opportunities for students to meet students from different years which would improve sense of belonging and create a bridge between the different year groups.
- Ensuring students know about the actions that stem from their feedback, such as 'You said, we did'.

- In rep training, including more 'behind the scenes' information, teaching reps about how different systems within the university work, to ensure that they know how they can make change and what systems are central or faculty based.
- Including a formal rep introduction, which would ensure that students know who their academic reps are.
- Better information about building access hours and making them longer.
- Involving students in planning student voice initiatives and making sure they have a say in what happens in their school or faculty.

Suggestions: (based on the discussion, but not suggested by students**)**

- Staff training about reps
- Rep conduct training

6. Clarity of student voice related communications

To what extent do you agree that the communications about these student voice initiatives is clear:
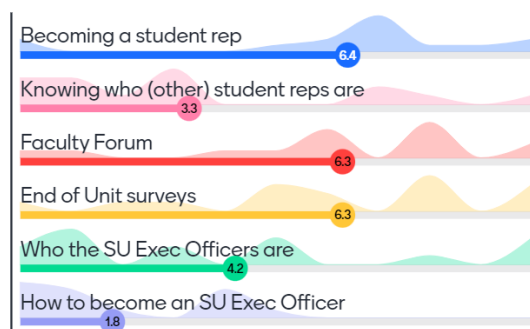
Most attendees noted that it's not clear how one becomes an SU Executive officer (1.8/10 know how to become one) and many participants do not know who the Executive officers are (4.2/10) which means Students' Union should think more about how Executive officer roles are promoted and make sure students know about this opportunity.

Additionally, many students do not know who their student reps are (3.3/10 know who (other) student reps are).

Based on the responses, it seems that most participants know how one would become a student representative (6.4/10) and are aware of Faculty Forum (6.3/10) and End of Unit surveys (6.3/10). It's important to note that most of the participants are reps which means that some parts, for example, how to become a rep, are well known between the participants. However, even in the audience of many reps, the responses show that they don't know who the other reps are.

Recommendations

- Better promotion of SU Exec roles and what they do

7. How to improve student voice related communications?

- Better promotion of student representatives and their work.
- More surveys that would influence faculty's decisions.
- Commitment to feedback loops
- Other suggestions: clarity on how to become a rep, better advertising of student voice initiatives, better connection of students on the same course.

Students had a variety of suggestions on how the student voice related communications can be improved.

Most frequently mentioned suggestion was making sure that student representatives and what they do is promoted very clearly (5 comments). Students would like this to happen at the beginning of the year and supplement this by additional emails to the students on their course. Another recommendation was to make sure reps are promoted on Blackboard as well.

Second most frequently mentioned suggestion was having more surveys, such as mid-semester surveys (3 comments). Students noted that the end of the unit is too late to ask about issues that could have been solved during the semester.

Some students noted that not all feedback loops are working sufficiently (2 comments). Students would like to know what impact their feedback has and what has been done because of it.

Other suggestions included clarity on how to become a rep, better advertising of student voice initiatives, better connection of students on the same course. Some students would like longer SSLCs, better designed Blackboard pages, and MyManchester to be brought back.