

Report of Student Focus Groups

for

StELA Project

University of Limerick

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Executive Summary

The purpose of the focus groups was to analyse existing approaches and potential improvements to Student Feedback across a range of disciplines. Ultimately, it is intended that the outputs from the focus groups will inform the development of an intended institution wide Student Evaluation Policy, a Learning Analytics Policy and enhanced procedures to close the feedback loop at UL.

An external facilitator, Dr Maeve Lankford, Kaleidoscope Coaching & Facilitation was contracted to conduct and analyse the focus groups for students and staff respectively.

The development of focus group questions was informed by existing focus group themes used in the SHEILA project. Questions for Student Focus groups were developed by Sinead O’Sullivan, Sarah Gibbons and Maeve Lankford.

All focus groups were conducted online, using zoom.

In all, a total of 7 Student Focus groups were conducted between 18 and 23 November 2020, with 47 students participating overall. Participants were drawn from all undergraduate years and from amongst taught and research post-graduate programmes. There was one focus group per year of undergraduate study, one postgraduate focus group and two focus groups with participants from mixed undergraduate or postgraduate years.

There was clear and observable change among student views as they progressed through their years of study in UL in relation to

- concerns about consent and informed consent
- concerns about use and capture of data
- concerns about who had access to their data and
- views about opt-in/opt-out of both surveys and supports offered.

A composite report of all focus groups is provided below. Key themes and any related suggestions are captured under the focus group themes identified and used in the SHEILA project.

Transparency

It is clear from the focus group discussions that students generally are surprised at the volume and variety of the data being collected on them, not just in the virtual learning environment but across all data collection points. Early year participants expressed least surprise or concern and from third year onwards students expressed concern about access to the data being captured and whether their consent is being sought.

Students in the latter years expressed the sentiment that the more sophisticated one gets with capturing data on an individual student’s journey, the more progressive and frequent there need to be opportunities to give informed consent for the capture and use of that data.

In one group in particular, participants were concerned about the anonymity of UL data specifically and examples were given of ways in which student numbers and data like student grades seem to be routinely shared in ways that do not protect students’ identities nor anonymity.

Purpose

Participants in the focus groups perceived legitimate purpose for the use of data in each of the following broad and anticipated areas: to improve the University’s service quality; to improve the

educational experience in a module/course/programme and to improve individual students' educational experience and were able to give suggestions of same unprompted.

There was clear evidence of increased concern about the uses of data, the purposes to which it could appropriately be put and whether and how one could interpret the data available as students progress through their academic studies. In general, students expressed the need for clarity around uses to which the data is put and/or inferences taken from such data, e.g., in terms of how engagement data is interpreted and whether they are graded based in all or in part on such data.

By third year, students were beginning to say that the data analytics should be being used more to support them collectively i.e., to enhance the student experience. There was also a frustration that the University doesn't join up the dots on the data it holds and instead keeps asking students for information that the University already holds on them. It would appear therefore, that students expect a more sophisticated quid pro quo that with widespread data capture, such data will be analysed and used to enhance their experiences as students at the university.

Broadly speaking, there is support for using the analytics as aggregate data, e.g. to enhance services, plan opening hours etc, but if there's going to be any kind of individual/personal application or associations made from the data there is a perception that formal consent is required for that.

Use of data to support educational need

In general, students identified two main ways in which data could be used to support their educational needs:

- to improve your overall learning experience and wellbeing
- to alert teaching staff early if you are at risk of failing a module or if you could improve your learning.

Students did talk about the impact of data on the relationship with teaching staff or tutors but in general perceived that access to personal data could actually damage relationships.

No students identified the following two potential uses of data:

- Identify the most successful pathway through your studies;
- present you with a complete profile of your learning in each and every module

Participants also indicated that the use of data analytics was not just about academic attainment and progression but also about enhancing the broader student experience.

Overall, concern was expressed here again in relation to issues around consent for use/access to data, and whether the purpose and use of the data was clearly known and understood by all. The validity of engagement data in particular was questioned.

Feedback to Students

Options for receiving feedback that were discussed included in-person feedback, written feedback and visuals/dashboards as prompted by a poll that identified same.

All were seen as having pros and cons and in-person feedback in particular was seen as having significant resource implications for the University and the question was raised as to whether it was likely to be implemented in any large-scale way as a result.

Written feedback was seen as having the advantage of being documented and that one could track progress over time. The disadvantage was that it can be hard to understand sometimes or to generalised to be meaningful.

First years, perhaps because they were launched intensively into the virtual learning environment, were more aware of the types of analytics available in Sulis or Moodle, higher years seemed less aware and post graduates almost not at all.

By those who were familiar with them, dashboards were generally viewed as highly suspect and open to gamification. Their suitability as a tool for providing feedback had mixed response.

Student focus group participants generally saw potential for using platforms like Sulis to give and receive feedback in a timely fashion, especially at module level and limiting any benefit to the Module Satisfaction Survey. Students also expressed frustration at repeatedly answering the same questions for module level surveys.

In terms of receiving feedback from the University on issues they had reported or commented upon, students indicated that they always wanted some kind of response, even if nothing is going to be done in response to feedback generate. In general, they were open to responses being communicated via any or all routes – in person, email, newsletter, social media. Students saw a positive role for social media as a means of communicating outcomes generally.

Where feedback was personal to them in the context of their academic journey, students expressed concern that feedback via email can get lost in their inbox and were typically not keen to receive contact via phone (text ok but not a call). Suggestions were made that feedback could be made via notifications being flagged on the likes of Sulis or an App with signposting to supports available.

Intervention

Typically participants favoured intervention on the part of the University. However, there was a sense that you can't make assumptions about individual needs or the most appropriate support, so such intervention is probably best being tentative and suggestive rather than directive in most cases.

There was some discussion about when is the best point to initiate an intervention, e.g., based on engagement data, within specific timeframes, on the basis of grade. Students generally do not tend to welcome contact via phone, certainly not face-to-face phone calls and give an indication that they'd want the opportunity to opt-out of same.

There was general agreement that students should be allowed to opt out of interventions. However, there was some evidence of students being more open to embracing the supports offered as they progressed through their studies. This suggests that if there is an opt-out option, students need the option to regularly revisit same.

There was some support for having automated flags within platforms like Sulis to flag issues and signpost the resources available, inviting students to make contact as desired.

There was a broad endorsement of the need for training to be given to teaching staff to support them in analysis of the educational data available and communicating the results into personalised feedback for students. There was also support for staff to receive training on the interpersonal communication skills required for giving feedback effectively.

Feedback TO the University

For first years, the focus group came too early in the semester for them to have had much experience of giving feedback to the University, all other groups engaged fully in the discussion.

In terms of enabling feedback, there was broad support for the requirement for it to be anonymous and an explicit requirement that it be responded to in some capacity.

A number of students also reported giving feedback to teaching staff either directly or as part of a survey or initiative taken by class reps to which they got no response. In such circumstances, they requested clear pathways for escalating issues of concern.

There were multiple references to surveys as one of the main means of giving feedback, with the MSS in particular coming in for criticism (not referred as MSS but identified as the survey for individual modules). It was regarded as too generalised to be useful and currently not customised to capture the online experience.

Other means of giving feedback that were identified included: the forum and lecture reports (on Sulis); contacting the lecturer directly, class reps and office hours. It was also suggested that additional means exist but aren't being used, e.g. world café.

There was general frustration that feedback requests come too late in the semester for changes to be made for the cohort involved and frustration at lack of responsiveness altogether.

In terms of responding to feedback, students identified the following as options, all of which are welcome and there was no particular preference overall: face-to-face interaction; written communication, including email and notifications on e.g. Sulis; social media and responding in kind, i.e., if feedback was written, the response could be written etc.

Consent and Ownership of Data

Postgraduate students in particular raised concerns about consent and ownership of data and raised pertinent questions around whether the University has data controllers in place and if so, whether they are bound by an ethical code of conduct. In general, the longer a student was at the University the more concern they expressed on the topic of consent and ownership of data.

Broadly speaking, participants were more relaxed about use of data in aggregate form. As may be anticipated, they expressed particular concern about who had access to any data that was personal in nature and /or could identify the individual. It is worth noting, that referencing students by their student number was not seen as a secure way of hiding their identify.

Participants were also concerned about the possibility of use of predictive analytics. First years in particular felt that predictive data shouldn't be taken too seriously and other groups also pointed to the exceptions in any likely prediction based on background or previous academic achievement.

Autonomy

While there was unanimous consensus among first years for the option to opt out from unofficial surveys, almost all other groups felt that it needs to be a bit more nuanced. In general, the consensus was more in favour of keeping access to surveys open.

Opt-out from supports offered was also unanimously favoured by First years but was more nuanced amongst more senior years. Participants who favoured the option to opt-out did request that opt-out would be periodically revisited in the event that students changed their minds about same.

Where there was the opportunity for additional feedback at the end of the Focus groups, participants to the opportunity to raise the following:

- Whether and how student data is used by the University after a student has graduated
- Concern as to how the University protects access to and anonymises student data
- Suggestions for enhancing online teaching
- Request for more reading resources to be made available online as ebooks or PDFs
- Complimenting the level of support for students during Covid
- Harnessing the insights provided through unsolicited feedback on Social Media

Some Facilitator Observations

The issue of consent and informed consent needs to be clearly addressed and communicated, including in any policies arising from this work.

The purposes to which the University intends to put data collected, the controls on access, assurances around confidentiality and anonymity and the limitations on use inside and outside the organisation all need to be clearly identified and communicated to both staff and students.

Use of data analytics to inform interventions with individual students is perhaps best undertaken at a programme level.

Highlighting the use of data to support and enhance existing practices may help staff and students alike to see the potential of embracing same and that automating some information is simply streamlining what was already being done and enhancing its effectiveness.

There is a clear opportunity to exploit the various VLE platforms to enhance feedback and close the feedback loop.

Report of Student Focus Groups

Introduction

The University currently provides a number of channels to allow students evaluate and provide feedback on their learning experience. The most common student evaluation channels take the form of surveys, which range from institutionally sponsored surveys to local level initiatives. Existing, known challenges with this approach include a lack of oversight and governance of the volume, frequency and timing of survey activity and the resulting impact on student response rates. This in turn, affects the perception of the reliability and validity of that feedback.

In many cases, the formal survey reporting mechanisms at institutional, faculty, unit and programme level are said to rely predominantly on manual processes. This resource-intensive approach elongates the period between an issue arising and the opportunity for action and closure of the feedback loop. As the resulting datasets and reports are typically viewed in isolation and not correlated, it is argued that institutional capacity to respond effectively to the student voice at programme and discipline level is reduced.

The University of Limerick (UL) successfully bid for funding from the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education to take a first principles approach to evaluating why and how student feedback is requested across a range of disciplines and learning contexts in UL from the perspective of teaching staff, students and faculty management. It is intended, that based on the outputs of this work, an institution wide Student Evaluation Policy will be developed, central to which will be associated procedures for closing the feedback loop. It is also intended that a supporting Learning Analytics Policy, leveraging existing outputs from the SHEILA, ORLA & DESSI projects will be developed to take advantage of recent enhancements in the University's business intelligence provision.

As part of the data gathering for this initiative an external facilitator, Dr Maeve Lankford, Kaleidoscope Coaching & Facilitation was contracted to support the initiative as follows:

- Support the planning of the focus group sessions
- Facilitate the focus groups and structured interviews virtually
- Provide a written report comprising a composite report of outputs from each category of stakeholders (students, teaching staff and faculty management respectively) and a detailed thematic analysis of issues identified across all categories of stakeholders and options for change / solutions to perceived challenges

The intention is to analyse existing approaches and potential improvements to Student Feedback across a range of disciplines and learning contexts from all stakeholder perspectives, specifically: students, teaching staff and faculty management. Ultimately, it is intended that the outputs will inform the development of the intended institution wide Student Evaluation Policy, a Learning Analytics Policy and enhanced procedures to close the feedback loop at UL.

The development of focus group questions was informed by existing focus group themes used in the SHEILA project. The latter mainly focussed on the use of data as a feedback tool to students and referred to attitudes about how that data may be/can be/should be used. The staff questions in the SHEILA project touched on how that data can be used to enhance teaching & learning. Questions for Student Focus groups were developed by Sinead O'Sullivan, Sarah Gibbons and Maeve Lankford. Questions for the Staff Focus groups were developed by Sinead O'Sullivan, Angelica Riskey and Maeve Lankford.

The following is the report of the Student Focus Groups.

All focus groups were conducted online, using zoom. Focus groups were recorded onto Maeve Lankford's Zoom account and automatically transcribed via the Zoom facility for same. The recordings and transcripts and any inputs into the Chat function were available to Maeve Lankford only and will be deleted within approximately 6 weeks of submission of the final report of outputs. In total, seven student focus groupsⁱ were conducted as follows:

- First Year Student Focus Group – 18 November 2020, 2pm (1st year FG)
- Second Year Focus Group – 19 November 2020, 10am (2nd Year FG)
- Third Year Focus Group – 19 November 2020, 12 noon (3rd Year FG)
- Fourth Year Focus Group – 23 November 2020, 12 noon (4th Year FG)
- Mixed Focus Group A – 23 November 2020, 10am (Mixed FG A)
- Mixed Focus Group B – 23 November 2020, 2pm (Mixed FG B)
- Post-graduate Taught/Research Focus Group – 18 November 2020, 4pm (PG FG)

The outputs from the Focus Groups are coded as per the above. There were a number of points whereby student views could be seen to be changing consistent with their year of study, and the coding enables this to be seen within the document.

In general, there was good participation and engagement from all attendees. Participants in all Student Focus Groups were advised that their attendance was being noted and confirmed to Sinead O'Sullivan, Director of Quality at UL, in order to enable the voucher they got for participation.

A number of polls were used in each focus group to capture some responses quantitatively – see Appendix 1 for details. All responses to poll questions in all focus groups were anonymous.

All polls were shared directly back to the Director of Quality for separate analysis in-house.

A composite report of all focus groups is provided below, with key themes and any recommendations being captured under each respective question. For ease of analysis, the responses from the different focus groups are coded as per the codes used above. All quotes are verbatim and in italics, including any comments captured from the Chat function.

Transparency

Participants were shown the following graphic, generated by the Director of Quality, which demonstrates the various places along the student journey which serve as data collection points:



They were asked about their awareness of data being collected in all these ways and locations and whether there were any surprises or omissions when they consider it.

Amongst first years, in terms of awareness of data being collected it ranged from “[I had] No idea” to “I’m not really surprised”. Even among post graduate participants, there was a sense of not really having thought about this previously but when they see the data collection points shared on the slide, they’re not that surprised that such data generally is being collected:

“I wouldn’t have like actively thought of it, but like, it’s not surprising that they would be collecting at those points” (Mixed FG B)

Surprises:

Typically participants were a bit surprised to see the library as a data collection point and also parental employment (CEO) and career destinations respectively.

Library:

“I didn’t know that that was being kept... well I don’t really care, but I just didn’t know” (2nd Year FG)

“...with Sulis and the libraries I suppose like you know just wasn’t really aware of that, you haven’t really been told”. (2nd Year FG)

“The library jumped out at me. I think because well, I would have thought we just go there in our own little world, a bit of a sanctuary, but but now it seems like big brothers are watching and certainly not something I was aware of” (PG FG)

Parental Employment:

“I didn’t realize that even my parents’ employment is included in that” (2nd Year FG)

Graduate Employment/First Destinations

"First job one. It's very big brotherish" (3rd Year FG)

"I was surprised that the job ... information is collected" (PG FG)

Typically, the earlier in the year of study, students had more awareness or perhaps assumed, that activity on Moodle or Sulis was being captured. It wasn't until the Fourth Year Group that it was raised as something surprising:

"Keeping track of your interaction with like module content on Sulis, I didn't know that all of that would have been kept" (4th Year FG)

and another suggested surprised that such interaction would/could be captured when working remotely:

"I thought on University PCs but not exactly off campus". (4th Year FG)

Amongst Post Graduates, in particular, only approx. half of the participants in the focus group were aware that that data was being collected through the likes of Sulis and Moodle and visits to the library. Post graduates expressed surprise at the *"length of the list"* and the *"amount"* of data being collected altogether.

Concern about consent

Among third years and upwards, immediately upon seeing all the data collection points, a concern was raised about consent and who had access to the data being collected.

"I have a question about that, since we're going to enter the library ... are we giving up our, our like our consent? If we, if someone wants to look at maybe... people studying in library for so long, what will their grades be, if there's any influence between it, can those researchers, just take up the data from those students that are, that are going into library for so long, like is is the open data for like nearly everybody? ... I think it would be inappropriate. No, I mean that for me when I like it's kind of like a necessity to go to library, but I don't exactly want to want to be studied without consent." (3rd Year FG)

In particular, the issue of informed consent was being raised the further students were along their student journey.

"...say if I'm logging into a website, it tells me exactly what data is being harvested at the time... but say if I'm walking into the library, I'm not being told 'hey, your data is going to be harvested', and even when you log into a website and stuff like that it's customisable, you can choose to reject some information being shared, whereas I've never had the option to choose which information is being shared about me to the University so things like that, where you have the option to opt out of things you're not comfortable with would be kind of a priority for me"... "Even if I am, [asked for consent in the University] it's something I'm not conscious of" (4th Year FG)

For post graduate students in particular, they were beginning to see a disconnect between how much data the University has on them and appears to be able to use and the perceived hoops they have to go through as researchers to access data and get consent to use it.

"I was quite surprised by the length of the list. And what entered my head was wow all that information is being collected and I'm not aware of it. And I suppose I started then thinking, oh, is consent obtained for all of this information to be recorded and have I ticked some box ages ago that I wasn't really aware of that that gave my permission for this to be to be collected and

analysed" ... "I think it's interesting because as a researcher consent is so important, and we have to make sure that we have consent from every participant and for really small things as well. So, this, this does surprise me when I compare the two scenarios." (PG FG)

Interpretation of data gathered

Third years were also asking questions at this point about how e.g., library analytics are interpreted. For example, one participant gave an example that an automated email could be sent to students who were attending the library less than peers in their cohort. Others felt this was inappropriate because you couldn't necessarily correlate the two:

"But then there's nothing to determine other kind of factors influencing that. Like someone could be studying at home, as opposed to in the library like, their grades wouldn't solely based on hours in the library" (3rd Year FG)

"Plus a lot of people use the library as a social kind of hangout" (3rd Year FG)

By the Fourth Year Group, there was also concern being expressed as to what interpretations are being made about academic habits also:

"I'm not sure about people knowing about my learning habits, kind of... I guess it's just related to my general thing about like about being judged I guess for how well I work or how badly I work" (4th Year FG)

Difficulties for students accessing their own data

There was also genuine frustration expressed by one participant that the University gathers so much information but then makes it hard for the individual student to access *their own information* to satisfy other internal units!

"it's kind of the amount of information being collected really kind of stands at odds for me with the amount of work I have to put in to actually get any information about my standing in university from [the] university. Because the simple information for my registration. Can I please have a formal document stating, since when am I registered until when because it's actually needed to be internally registered at the university in the corporate or whichever one of those payments which is also funny straightaway our own university payment portal that requires me to present my proof of registration as a student, and it took me a really long time to get that information from UL. So I would just like to point that out." ... "it's digital era, its 2020 after all, they do have my records. Why do I have to send so many emails and push so much [to get my information]" (PG FG)

Omissions:

One participant in the fourth year group asked if membership of clubs and societies was being recorded, not that they wanted it to be but were curious about whether it was or not?

"Participation in groups and stuff, societies, is that one of them there [data collection points on slide] would that be recorded?" (4th Year FG)

One student expressed surprised that the President's Volunteer Award isn't being captured although it appears on students' transcripts so perhaps is recorded someplace:

"I think one point that maybe might not being captured is the Presidents volunteer award. ... But it's actually on your transcripts, once you graduate." (Mixed FG A)

Purpose

Examples of what students perceived as legitimate purposes for which the broad range of data could be used fell into all the areas anticipated. In general, students in higher years expressed increasing levels of concern about consent to any data, whatever the purpose for which it was being used. And a participant at postgraduate level was more inclined to want to know what data was being used to identify a reason to intervene and, without prompting, said they'd want a real option to be able to refuse any help offered:

*"I would like to be very much [to be] informed exactly what, which parts of that, which part of the data and how [it led to decision to intervene]. And actually, I would like to be given an option, and a **real** option to say no, as in 'Thank you. No! I will mind my own business'" (PG FG)*

To improve the University's service quality

The following are all quotes that participants shared alluding to data being legitimately used to improve or enhance University services, captured by Focus Group.

"they're trying to see whether which services are being used and which ones aren't really" (1st year FG)

"To see if students are aware of how to use services like library" (1st year FG)

"see where the demand is and judge whether I don't know to expand certain programmes or to diminish certain programmes and stuff like that" (1st year FG)

"Improve facilities in UL for us" (2nd Year FG)

"to make resources available to students who need them" (2nd Year FG)

"what kind of students the university can attract" (2nd Year FG)

"They use that data to organize events inside of the the library" (3rd Year FG)

"You can see what courses are generating jobs and what courses aren't ... you can identify which courses are more successful for particular routes as well and since they're gathering the interests as they're coming into college you can see if the courses they're doing are getting them the jobs that they want, and which course is probably better suited for those jobs" (4th Year FG)

"Showing employment after certain degrees...just kind of like average employment rate after ...course and stuff like that and kind of sectors, people go into ..." (Mixed FG A)

"if you're looking at what people are checking out [of the library] what maybe they need to get more volumes of a particular text." (Mixed FG A)

"I would say maybe just ensuring that the like types of people on campus that are accepted into university are diverse, so that they're not like ignoring certain categories of people or types of people" (Mixed FG B)

"I suppose it's kind of like efficiency of the services" (PG FG)

"I wish to say that data collected can be used legitimately to improve the services rendered to the students by the University." (PG FG)

To improve the educational experience in a module/course/programme

The following are quotes, presented by Focus Group, that referred to legitimate use of data to improve the educational experience of students in a module/course/programme.

"to see how well the teaching is going, e.g., Like the statistics from like a test if they're all in the lower region" (1st year FG)

"I suppose with Sulis a lecturer could see what a student is and isn't looking at and see what alternatives they can use so students can better understand the course work" (2nd Year FG)

"The surveys could be used to improve some of the modules...based on the feedback, changes can be made" (4th Year FG)

"During Covid times... you could use the data to measure the effectiveness of the Sulis platform or the engagement with it during these times" (4th Year FG)

"I suppose, maybe from a post grad perspective if they're finding that maybe a certain cohort of post grads are struggling they could use the survey results to maybe bring in some sort of policy that their supervisor has to see them more or they get more time with certain supports." (Mixed FG A)

"I think they could be using it to like improve like the virtual learning, especially like it's more important this year. Okay, so like the methods teachers, like some lectures, choose to teach with"
"Maybe like on Sulis they could make like group chats specific to the course and their year. So like in first year, like it was quite hard like kind of doing stuff on your own and like team learning is always like encouraged within engineering. And we made a group chat on Snapchat, which took like ages just to form because we didn't know each other and we still like even though we're in second year, we just added more people that we found out, were in the course just recently, because we weren't aware they were in the course. So, like, just having somewhere to communicate, like other than just through email. And like we can help one another one, one another if we don't understand stuff. And we can book or we can remind one another about the assignments and stuff." (Mixed FG B)

"I think if they had like data of people who are going to like the Maths or Science Learning Center for certain modules and they could see like, Oh, there's a lot of people going for a certain module and they could really like feedback that to like the lecture saying Like a lot of students are finding your module very difficult ..." (Mixed FG B)

To improve individual student's educational experience

The following are quotes indicating participants thoughts on legitimate uses of data to improve individual student's educational experience, presented by Focus Group:

"if you're doing well or not, or if you're struggling" (1st year FG)

On prompting Second Years were broadly supportive of the data being used to enable support for an individual student – no particular quotes indicating same

"I think also, you could set up like an automated email service that if someone's grades are going down, and it's related to them not going to the library, they're clearly not studying so you could email them that" (3rd Year FG)

"...to identify new students... who might have difficulties based on I guess where they're coming from, you could use it to identify I guess, em studying approaches that aren't helping kind of, but I think that is, you know, that would require consent for someone to monitor your, I guess, individual learning habits" (4th Year FG)

"... to try and predict if someone's going to be basically fail if you're not engaging enough in any course content" that's kind of the main argument for this whole data analytics for for em universities, that's what I've gathered so far from like my own understanding of the the analytics market aimed towards universities" (Mixed FG A)

"I would welcome it, on my course, [analysing the data to enable individual level/one-to-one interventions] say in first year we do all the same modules that there could be up to 500 say in business. So there's definitely Like Some people are struggling and it's not really known and some people do well in them. So I definitely would welcome that data being analysed" (Mixed FG A)

"Seeing as they can like monitor the grades they should em like there's like math learning tests and stuff and they should like give like groups of people that they can like target through emails,

instead of like having loads of emails sent out with things like that they may be good as well. So it'd be like a waste of just emails filling up and they might miss the Maths one that they're bad at, but they might see the one that they're good at and go, like 'that's useless to me'." (Mixed FG B)
"Like I am an international student as well, ..., and as a result they would send me specific emails from the international division as well, like maybe with details on trips that they're going on or like maps for navigating your way around them. So I guess just like giving you specific tools that will help your specific journey through UL." (Mixed FG B)

Concerns about consent

Again, by the time we got into a third year focus groups there was evidence of students being a bit more concerned about the purposes to which data could be put and the level of consent required for any data to be accessed. For the most part, participants were ok with the idea of anonymised data being used but once it got more personal, the consensus was they'd need to have given consent.

"I think once the data is anonymized like it's not saying my student number, like if it's just you can see their course, maybe, and it's all randomized that you don't know who's who, it could be used that way because obviously if it's your own number attached to it, then I suppose you would need some form of direct consent." (3rd Year FG)

Appropriate use of data

In the postgraduate group a concern was raised as to whether this type of analytics was the best way to determine interventions and who needed them and the question was raised of whether there were different and better ways to arrive at the same end:

"I would agree with what [name] said there, just in terms of, I think it's a very personal opinion on whether or not you want that information used. Like I would feel a little bit like as [name] said, 'Big Brother is watching me' if someone approached me to say, 'oh, do you want some help?'. So I personally wouldn't like that. Others might not mind it as much. But I'd wonder in terms of getting support for students em are there other ways of doing that? So, for example, through surveys and feedback of information that way that could be used instead. So where someone is giving consent to pass on that information with with the understanding that they may be contacted for for support after it." (PG FG)

In the third year focus group we got to the topic of the use of predictive data unprompted. They felt data could be analysed to predict demand for certain services or disciplines:

"They'd be able to use this like data like the courses that we're signing up for and the graduate jobs to see what ways the sectors are going right so they'll be able to use a prediction model to see how many students they're going to have to a certain course or discipline like next year, like wouldn't they?" (3rd Year FG)

But there was agreement that predictive data should not be applied to e.g. subject choices or disciplines:

"I don't think to influence people's decisions would be a correct way of going about it. Just because they're from a certain socio economic background shouldn't really determine what they want to do." (3rd Year FG)

"I agree with that, I don't think it should be used to limit people from certain backgrounds, not limit but direct or steer them." (3rd Year FG)

Use of Data to support Educational Needs

Participants in the focus groups were asked in what ways they felt background and educational data could be used to support their learning. Background data was defined as including previous educational attainment and demographic data. Educational data was defined as including any data collected from any physical or virtual learning activity.

Preliminary Concern about having and using data

By about question 3 in all the focus groups participants typically would be seeing the ramifications of how much data and how personal the data is that can be seen and potentially acted upon and they started to identify concerns around consent regarding who had access to the data without any prompting of same, e.g.,

"I don't think there's any harm in monitoring as long as the student agrees to it so that they are aware of it." (1st year FG)

It was also argued in the Post graduate group that the purpose of the data needs to be much more clearly communicated at the outset, in particular if it is being used as a basis for grading or assessment. It was also felt that access to the data should be consensual:

"But the context should be clear and it should be consensual and you should know that, what from, like information should be clear, like whether we will be graded on that thing, or why, what's the purpose of the data being taken from Sulis or whatever it is" (PG FG)

Post Graduate participants also raised questions about the validity of the engagement data in particular:

"I would probably question the validity of the data that's collected. So just because someone is spending X amount of time in the library or X amount of time on Sulis. It doesn't mean that the work that they're doing is of a high quality. Or that maybe that a person who spends less time on either those em in those places that doesn't mean that they're doing less work than somebody else. So I would really question how representative that actually is" (PG FG)

"And also, I could easily go on to Sulis download something download everything will take me 30 seconds. I've only been online for 30 seconds, but I've worked all day. So yes, I don't think it sounds like a great job." (PG FG)

One participant in the Post graduate group thought having this kind of data available was an "entirely terrible idea", irrespective of consent being given and the intended purposes. It was also argued that academic staff wouldn't even have time for dealing with it.

*"Can I say I think it's just an entirely terrible idea that anyone else can see how much hours is how many hours you spend online and things like that. This is nobody's business. ... I don't care if there is consent or not. Also, especially since you have consent and can be pressure on the consent, then can there can be people who don't understand that. Then there can be a culture of that, you know, in this department or course of study, we **do** give consent. Also, to be honest, I don't think that module leaders or academic consultants would actually want extra job loaded on them ... but leaving all that aside, I just find it entirely terrible idea." (PG FG)*

Preliminary Support for having and using data

However, participants typically saw it as helpful to have data available:

"I think it would be good to monitor as maybe one of the students is struggling and does not know where to go for or get help" (1st year FG)

“I think it’d be better to contact the student just in case the student aren’t aware of things they need to do” (1st year FG)

There was some merit seen in having information available to tutors and academic staff on how a cohort of students was getting on in a module:

“You know how we run a questionnaire which is a test, just not a question or preferences, but the Sulis test at the end of a block of, you know, information delivered. This can be somehow informative and I can see how it can be informative for the teacher like if everyone gets only 20% ‘dammit I clearly didn’t deliver the information clearly’.” (PG FG)

This question related more to individual student educational needs and by the Fourth year group, there was a sense that you’d have to do more qualitative research on the data in order to be able to offer individual support:

“The approach, that’d have to be more qualitative there if you wanted to get individual perspective, interviewing and less of kind of data collection and surveying because they usually get less participation I suppose” (4th Year FG)

There was also a sense among post graduate participants in particular that the data, particularly dashboard data had limited use or application where it pertained to study habits:

“it’s my private life. And what I do with my private life, and also how I study exactly with such you know detailed way it’s completely different to the question of results. ...that information you showed us you know hours spent on line and things like that. Like, I, I find it terrifying really.” (PG FG)

Amongst the postgraduate group, such data was seen as more appropriate for the use of the individual student, and that there is an issue of consent when anyone else is having access to that same information. The issue of ease of access to such data for the student was seen as important also:

“I suppose about [the dashboard] that you just showed there on that slide, if it’s used for the individual, if I can log in and see my own data, that is far less concerning than saying Okay, your academic advisor is going to see everything which you will have to go through all these jigs and reels to get that data yourself. I suppose that kind of comes into consent, who you want to see it and everything and ease of access for yourself if you want to see it.” (PG FG)

In preparing for the Focus Groups there were a number of categories identified into which it was anticipated that responses would fall:

- To improve your relationships with teaching staff or tutors
- To improve your overall learning experience and wellbeing
- To alert teaching staff early if you are at risk of failing a module or if you could improve your learning
- Identify the most successful pathway through your studies
- Present you with a complete profile of your learning in each and every module

These categories presented in black font and underlined below and the actual student responses that fell into those categories are captured accordingly. Allocation of quotes under respective headings was done by the facilitator.

There were two anticipated categories that were **not** identified by students at all:

- Identify the most successful pathway through your studies
- Present you with a complete profile of your learning in each and every module

To improve your relationships with teaching staff or tutors

In the discussions this early in the respective focus groups, it was seldom mentioned unprompted that analysis of this kind of data could enhance the relationship with students and their tutors or lecturers.

Damage to relationship with teaching staff or tutors

Among postgraduate participants however, there was a fear that access to such information might actually worsen relationships between students and their academic advisors generally.

“what if that supervisor or advisor saw this information and you know maybe cultural, socio-economic, and that caused them to have a bias against you. It could totally ruin the relationship.”
(PG FG)

“I just want to say like [name] raised a point that it can actually totally ruin your relationship with your course or module leader, whoever it is like, who is actually monitoring the data. Yeah, he is absolutely right about this.” (PG FG)

Similarly, later in the various focus group discussions, it did often come up that using the data and having it inform interventions could make things more difficult.

“the modules that I don't like. I wouldn't want to talk to my tutor about it because I don't. There are some modules that I have no clue about and I don't want to talk to the tutor and him know that I don't have a clue. I'd rather talk to him in writing.” (2nd Year FG)

There was also a sense that the relationship possibly doesn't really exist in the first place for staff to be able to make judgments about student capabilities, even with the data that's available. For example, one participant felt that a member of staff couldn't reach out to encourage a high performing student to do better because he wouldn't really know him or her.

“... a lot of the time, like the lecturers don't really know, like all the individuals, so like they're just going based off the results so they don't know whether you're capable of a higher grade or not”
(2nd Year FG)

To improve your overall learning experience and well-being

Participants did identify a number of ways in which they perceived that their background and educational data could be used to support their learning experience and well-being:

“I think it would be good to monitor as maybe one of the students is struggling and does not know where to go for or get help” (1st year FG)

“I think if someone is clearly not engaging even a little email saying is everything alright or if there's anything we can help you with? and stuff like that, just to keep that engagement” (1st year FG)

“It would be helpful for like the data that if they [tutor etc] could look at that, and then come out to me and see do I need help? Is there any more supports that we could give you? and everything like that.” (3rd Year FG)

To identify weaknesses in your learning and suggest ways to improve upon this

There was also evidence that participants could see potential in the data being used to identify weaknesses and suggest ways to improve

"I think it would be good to monitor as maybe one of the students is struggling and does not know where to go for or get help" (1st year FG)

"I think it'd be better to contact the student just in case the student aren't aware of things they need to do" (1st year FG)

"If a lecturer sees the student hasn't opened any of the lectures or watched any of the lectures ... and they haven't been up to date with the stuff that he, it would be okay if the lecturer emailed the student to see if everything's okay. But now it's like aggressive way where it's like you haven't done any of your work, that kind of way because you never know what's going on with the student" (2nd Year FG)

"It might be useful to know what time of the day you might be most productive, coz I mean, I can judge it myself a bit so but em it would kind of help to plan your day especially with like Covid now, I can choose when I'm going to walk the dog, when I'm going to do sports and I could put that at times when I don't necessarily need to be mentally, totally there" (4th Year FG)

"I think it would also be helpful if you could see like which modules you're spending most time on, it might help you divide your time better between modules" (4th Year FG)

"If you saw maybe data on how busy the library is on a certain week, like you could see that at mid-terms its very busy, you could see the data and change the time they'll apply to assignments maybe" (4th Year FG)

To alert teaching staff early if you are at risk of failing a module or if you could improve your learning

The potential of the data providing a kind of early warning system for students at risk was also identified by participants:

"to let them know [module leader/tutor] and see how their demographics in terms of maybe where they came from, or the school they went to would affect the university performance and how appropriate support could be given if the student turns out to be struggling" (1st year FG)

"I think if someone's grades if you look at, like, their average grades month to month and it starts slipping by like a certain delta say like their grades slip by 20% compared to last month well, then I think someone should reach out to that student, perhaps, and be like hey you're grades seem to be slipping, is everything okay...?" (3rd Year FG)

There was also a range of ways in which students felt any support can best be offered, ranging from a nudge to a push! On one level, it was felt there's a thin line between sharing data and raising concerns in a way that's supportive and actually risking causing the student to feel even worse. In the first year group in particular, it was felt that any approach would need to be very sensitively handled as per the quotes below:

"it's their choice, but maybe give them an option for support, but nothing too harsh" (1st year FG)

"keeping that minimal you know invasiveness so students don't feel pressured more, so like a little touch, a little nudge" (1st year FG)

And finally, there was also some concern expressed that the data might cause further concern or upset to students:

"Its embarrassing to be told that, you missed classes and are showing poor social activity" (1st year FG)

"From my own experience I'd hate to compare myself to others it just puts pressure on" (1st year FG)

To enhance the Student Experience

In the Third Year Focus group, they identified an additional way in which the data could be used to support their learning or, more broadly, could enhance the student experience. For example, it was suggested that the data could support timetabling, e.g. if it was known that students were also working, classes could be scheduled in ways that give them meaningful breaks between

“Like if there’d be any way to use like data that they collect to maybe form like the ideal time timetable for each module that’d be that’d be nice as well” (3rd Year FG)

It was also argued that a lot more could be done to use data to plan lecture times or access to onsite accommodation based on e.g. where students are coming from, travel times to the University etc.

“like looking at where people are traveling from... and then looking at maybe start times and finish times like for me, I’m from [place] and if I have a lecture at six o’clock on a Friday, I’m stuck in Limerick for the weekend” (3rd Year FG)

“if people further away, they get more prioritized for on campus accommodation or something.” (3rd Year FG)

“how many of the percentage of the [students on the] module are commuting and how helpful, it will be to to bring the hours kind of maybe together so that they don’t have such a hard time with [commuting]” (3rd Year FG)

Feedback TO students

Participants were asked about ways in which they would like to receive feedback from the analysis of their educational data. This was captured in a poll and was also the subject of discussion in all focus groups. Working with the poll, the three main ways identified were in person, via text and through the use of visualisations. Responses are provided under those headings along with commentary.

Preliminary Discussion

In one group (Mixed FG A) a concern was raised about the data and its validity before we could begin to talk about the best ways in which it might be used to give feedback to students:

"I just, I just want to say one thing that I think that like right now, even for me like one of my modules has em a mark's going for participation and it basically like a certain percentage of that is the lecturers viewing the Sulis, like, you know, participation score. And the thing is, like, you can easily game that result. Like you can just simply open up a few lectures like is it actually a true statistic? It's like you can fake you can fake, it so easily, so is it actually a valuable data really because it is so easily faked ... like I can simply go on Sulis right now, open up five lecturers notes, open a lecture and go for a walk, and it looks like I'm a great student!" (Mixed FG A)

There were broad ranging differences of opinion as to whether the feedback would be in person or by a more impersonal route. In general, first years were much more inclined to favour personal feedback whereas postgraduates were more inclined to prefer impersonal forms of feedback. When this observation was shared with the Postgraduate Focus Group participants, the following was offered as a potential reason for that:

"[the reason] We might be different from the undergrad is after a few years of college you're more used to like self-directed learning, self-directed development. You kind of want to internalize that information yourself and as [name] said if there's a problem, you can go and meet your module leader..." (PG FG)

In Person

The main advantages to in person communication were that it is perceived as "more personal" and would enable the opportunity to more fully explore and understand the feedback: "You can discuss it".

Advantages of In Person Feedback

It was felt that in person feedback could enhance the relationship, one would feel better understood and it would also be more of a two way process.

"I think in person you'd feel you'd be more understood by the module leaders" (1st year FG)

"in person it's a lot more personalized as you can talk to them and you can kind of find solutions if you're going wrong in anything.... if someone's right in front of you like it would motivate you, a tiny bit more" (2nd Year FG)

"I think definitely asking questions and having like the conversation about your grades or whatever em assignment you had rather than just getting the grade and then that being it" (3rd Year FG)

"you can address it there and then whereas an email you're just waiting for responses, and especially right now I don't know a lot of technical issues going on in UL" (3rd Year FG)

"You could discuss what you're seeing, you could get a second opinion on it" (4th Year FG)

“with an email or a dashboard like, you can't reply to it where at least if it was one on one with your lecture and you know you were struggling, you can then talk to them about how to improve that” (Mixed FG A)

“And you can also offer feedback on the feedback like in person” (Mixed FG B)

“I think if it was provided in person, you could like you could actually interact, ask questions, more questions rather than just seeing a number” (Mixed FG B)

“In person, you kind of like more so have to go, whereas the App, you don't really yeah you can like kind of put it off and not check it”. (Mixed FG B)

It was also suggested that in person is preferable to any kind of public feedback on e.g. a dashboard

“I prefer feedback on my academics to be personal with my Course Director. This is due to the effect inferiority complex if it made so open.” (PG FG)

Disadvantages of In Person Feedback

The perceived disadvantages around in person feedback were that it could add more pressure, in particular if delivered by the tutor or lecturer in a module that you were finding particularly difficult. And for some, they felt it would be very intimidating in any circumstances. Others felt the risk was that they'd get emotional.

“That just adds more pressure on if you have to talk to the tutor.” (2nd Year FG)

“I personally wouldn't like face to face feedback. ...I would just find it very intimidating” (3rd Year FG)

“depending on the person... sometimes it could be really intimidating” (4th Year FG)

“You might get like emotional or something” (Mixed FG B)

“The emotional aspect as well, like just thinking about it, like, people are emotional, they might get like distressed.” (Mixed FG B)

Resource issue with In Person Feedback

One participant argued that they just couldn't see one-to-one interventions happening whether desirable or not based on the volume of students in UL:

“If you say you want to have One to one [interventions] for every single 15,000 people in UL like it's not gonna happen realistically. I see I can see email working or a dashboard, but like, realistically, I don't see like even so far {student was in final year} I probably have never really had a one on one with any, like, you know, guidance person, lecturer or Tutor.” (Mixed FG A)

Another concurred:

“I would definitely think it will be better in person, but I just can't see it happening” (Mixed FG A)

Written communication

Undoubtedly some participants favoured written feedback

Advantages of Written communication

For some, written communication had some advantages, not least as it gave an option for reflection and time to consider what was being said. It was also felt helpful that written feedback would be documented and also that you can track your progress over time.

“with an email like you can go back and see what they've actually said instead of being stuck on one topic. That's why I'd say email would be better.” (Mixed FG A)

“Documentation, you can work on your strengths, ...you have time to look into it again” (4th Year FG)

“You could like screenshot the emails that you're getting and save them and like kind of track your own personal progress over time. ... I feel like with like in person ones [feedback] you can kind of like forget some details, like some important points. So if it's like an email or like documented form, you can always just like check back.” (Mixed FG B)

“first of all, is going to be a record of it, you can refer back to it later... So I think start off in writing and if there's a problem we have the option to talk in person” (PG FG)

Disadvantages of written communications

The disadvantages around email and written communications generally was the time delay and the potential for confusion. It was also felt that such communication can feel quite impersonal. Other concerns expressed were around being alone with the information and not knowing what to do with it.

“I find the emails can be a bit cryptic as well ... email doesn't answer all our questions and it sure, it takes so long for to get for to get all the answers that that we want that it just eventually becomes more work” (3rd Year FG)

“You might be alone with it [the information] and not know where to go from there” (4th Year FG)

“I find that email feedback is very generalised as well, even if they don't mean to generalise it, they kinda do” (4th Year FG)

“[written feedback] might come off like a little callous or something like there's no personal touch to it, I guess.” (Mixed FG B)

One student shared the experience of being offered support via email, which was helpful in general but which also led to confusion because it wasn't clear where the problem arose.

“I was emailed previously and I found it helpful but was confused as to who had identified me as struggling and what module leaders felt that way. I didn't know where the problem was. (1st Year FG)

Security of written communications

Some participants expressed concerns about the security of data being shared via email.

“How are we meant to know that we are the only ones receiving these documents, like who also has access to it? That would be a, kind of my concern anyway” (4th Year FG)

“On campus [sometimes] when I go onto a computer, I can see that somebody has already logged into their email, so if I'm able to see all of their personal data right down to exactly how they're performing at College, that's a kind of a serious issue, to be able to see that much detail on a person ... it's happened because people haven't logged out properly but even if they've just saved their passwords, even accidentally on a computer, I've seen that as well” (4th Year FG)

Methods for providing written communications

There was a lot of discussion amongst first years in particular that it is best to have notifications posted via Sulis because emails sent directly to their inbox get lost because there are so many of them. Other groups also had concerns about the likelihood of missing an email and suggested that sharing it via an app is much better

“instead of like an email I’d say they can do sulis notifications as it would be much better” (1st Year FG)

“Theres so many emails being sent so it might be kinda lost” (1st Year FG)

“It’s better if it’s all on the one platform” (1st Year FG)

“sometimes you might even miss the email” (2nd Year FG)

“There’s a lot of emails sent out from UL so it might just get lost and you like have to search for it, rather than like in the app, it would just be specifically for that” (Mixed FG B)

Recommendation/Suggestions for Written Communications

It was also suggested that written feedback needs to both indicate what the concern is and the suggested solution:

“Whereas in writing, it's straight to the point and you know where you're going wrong so you can just pick up from the notes, wherever you need to....Yes, an example of kinda where I'm going wrong. And then just point me in the right direction so I know where I'm going in the future”. (2nd Year FG)

It was also suggested that students could be sent a written communication in the first instance and offering face to face if they wish to explore/discuss it:

“A possible idea might be to present feedback in visualisations or emails, then if some want additional face to face consultations they could be available?” (3rd Year FG)

Visuals/Dashboards

Not all participants in Focus Groups were particularly aware of analytics currently available via the likes of Sulis or even what a dashboard might look like. A slide was shared showing a sample dashboard to enable everyone to participate in the discussion – see appendix 1.

Preliminary Discussion

Some students had clearly seen some of the analytics available on Sulis for example. E.g., *“yes I can see that when I complete tests or quizzes” (1st Year FG)*

One participant, felt that students generally welcome this kind of information and spoke of all their peers actively engaging with e.g, exam results on Sulis as soon as they’d completed tests:

“I think a lot of people would like that kind of app to see the statistics and stuff, because you can see on grade books on Sulis already and all people like view those like right after doing a test, so they can see how well they did like compared to the class and all” (Mixed FG B)

Another participant saw certain advantages to being able to see trends as regards grades and engagement levels of a cohort:

“if you got really bad feedback on an assignment [you could] see like okay, is this a general trend across the entire course like that could indicate that maybe it's an issue with the way that the teacher is delivering the content? If it's like all across the board like even students that typically do well performing poorly on this one assignment. So if you had that data, you might be able to make like a stronger case for I don't know, maybe like curving the grade.” (Mixed FG B)

Again, a participant raised concerns about the validity of some of the data e.g. on Sulis and felt that dashboards simply incentivise students to ‘gamify’ the data rendering it unreliable for use:

“And the thing is, if you create a dashboard. I feel like by having a visible score to hit then yeah, it's easy, that'll just further incentivize gaming the system just because, like, it looks good.”
(Mixed FG A)

Overall, there were mixed feelings about the usefulness of comparative data:

“it's kind of a double edged sword if you ask me... in one way it can help you to understand, what, that you are not spending enough time for example studying, but in another way it could discourage you because when you see you are far below the average you kind of have that feeling of not being motivated, it's like, yeah, I am very, very terrible” (4th Year FG)

“I think that could be useful information for them to know where they should be aiming for. And then also, could I suppose it could go both ways, though it could either motivate them to perform better, or it could induce maybe some anxiety and that might be negative I think so it depends on the student too.” (PG FG)

Advantages of Visuals/Dashboards

For those who thought the comparative dashboards helpful, the following capture the views as to what is helpful and why:

“It is helpful to know where you are roughly, in comparison to the rest of the class, ... I think it doesn't even have to be like obviously not a person by person, this person got this, but just a general scheme of what the class got.” (3rd Year FG)

The comparisons were also seen as motivating and encouraging students to stay in the upper grades bands.

“you go into the grade book and go into Analytics, you can actually see how well everyone's doing. And you see where you fall in, in terms of everyone else. And that does, for me anyway, it gives me a drive to to go that higher to try and stay in those higher brackets” (1st Year FG)

For others they felt it would be helpful to know if you're falling behind the others in your cohort.

“I think it's better that we know about the others just to know if you're falling behind too much.”
(1st Year FG)

“Yeah, that would be very helpful if it was private and public information, just you can see” (2nd Year FG)

It was also suggested that dashboards can provide a handy snapshot of how you're doing in general:

“...they might be able to get a kind of generalised view of how, their feedback, if they don't want to go through reading paragraphs of emails of reports and percentages ...and then they can get on with their day ... they're getting you know, lots of stuff to look at every day, you now, I'm getting like, I'd say at least 20 emails a day that I've to read through carefully and em everything on Sulis and if you're using Moodle that's another thing that you have to be keeping up on so if you have something small and to the point to just kinds say, hey, you can look into this in more detail if you want but heres just a general em, a general idea” (4th Year FG)

Disadvantages of Visuals/Dashboards

For others, there was quite a concern that the dashboards could create more distress and that comparison with others generally isn't always helpful.

“I think there's pros and cons to seeing the data, you might feel bad knowing maybe everyone is doing well and you're not” (1st Year FG)

“Kind of hard to explain but you kind of want the privacy, but also maintaining like, you know, that kind of knowing that you're just, you know, up to speed with everything.” (2nd Year FG)

“It all depends on the students like if they're struggling a lot. And then you show them that the average is way above them like you could do motivate them in some ways, because they're like, oh, what's the point in trying. If I'm so far behind already like” (2nd Year FG)

“And I think it's a good idea [comparative data on dashboards] in one sense, but maybe like it could be very disheartening. If you're consistently like all your [grades] lower than the average” (3rd Year FG)

“they might feel pressurised to try to work harder for college and then the night might loose out on sleep or other essentials” (Mixed FG B)

“some people would just start like comparing themselves and feel like under pressure that they're not performing as well as like the aggregate of like classmates and all” (Mixed FG B)

“can I just say, I said that before and I say it again. I don't think we should really ever care how other people do. And we should really only focus on ourselves. And I also think it can also not only can create anxiety. It can also make you feel like you've already reached the top if you're on the top, but maybe you can actually get even better, just being the top of the class, maybe the class is just shite.” (PG FG)

Recommendations/ Suggestion for Visuals/Dashboards::

One suggestion is that comparative dashboard data would be optional:

“I think it should be made an option to see your performance in comparison to your peers” (1st Year FG)

A suggested way to enable an option such as this was to have it as something you'd have to click on to enable, e.g.

I would like to ... not be thrown into the comparative feedback straightaway. Maybe if you click on this, be brought to a separate tab and you can see the comparison. Maybe some people don't want to see it, but you have the option if you'd like to. So yeah, it's kind of best of both worlds but you're, you're opting in to see where you are in relation to your peers. (PG FG)

Intervention

Participants were asked their views on how teaching staff and tutors should approach giving feedback to students based on analysis of their data.

A poll was conducted regarding whether or not there is an obligation to act; whether students should have the option to refuse support and whether any specific kind of training should be given to teaching staff to understand the analysis of the educational data and to accommodate the results into personalised feedback for students.

Preliminary Discussion

In this discussion, one participant suggested it'd be helpful to know the inferences that are being made on the data provided on the likes of Sulis by both teaching and support staff and by the system itself, essentially raising concern about potential biases:

“And I think it'd be interesting or like valuable for students to know what inferences that the actual software or the teaching staff will make from the data. ... will there be bias in like how lectures and Tutors actually viewed the data and will that possible bias like effect...?” (Mixed FG A)

This was supported by another who felt it important to know what the flags are and for everyone to understand that such flags aren't absolute:

I suppose it's difficult to know kinda like what they're picking up on, like what's going to be the big flags. Like you could be struggling, but go under the radar because you are actually kinda putting in a bit of work. ...certain people might go under the radar and certain people who really shouldn't be on the radar kind of get picked up. (Mixed FG A)

Obligation to Act:

In Favour of Action

In the discussion that ensued, there was broad consensus among participants that they would want help if struggling and by implication that the University should normally act

“yes to help me if I am struggling” (1st Year FG)

“I think lectures should act if they see that a student might not be able to pass or get at least more than 40%, then they should check in and see if everything's okay” (2nd Year FG)

Concern about /Opposition to Action:

Another felt one shouldn't make assumptions, that different students have different aspirations:

“You have to have to recognize that some for some students getting a pass is all they want ...you have to take that into account and you shouldn't be putting pressure on people if they're going at the level they want.” (Mixed FG A)

Similarly, one student felt that assumptions shouldn't be made about the type of resources or help that is needed:

“Like a student might need like resources, not like education or anything, they might need em counseling or something. And sometimes the university, like they don't know like someone has like those kinds of issues at first. And they might just like pile on with their stuff like, oh, you need to get your deadlines in and all. They don't know like how that person's like feeling like, they need someone to talk to them.” (Mixed FG B)

For others in the first year group, it was said plainly they would NOT want the University to intervene

"I wouldn't want them to intervene either" (1st Year FG)

Knowing when to take Action:

The Fourth Year participants got into the **circumstances** which would appropriately trigger action:

"There should be like a minimum threshold maybe of like general usage of Sulis and if it's below like a certain amount they should probably like engage with the students, remind them that they've course work to do" (4th Year FG)

Another group (Mixed #1) offered the following as guidelines for intervention:

"Maybe after you failed something because everyone is different, like I might put in 20 hours a week where someone else might only put in 10 and we could get the same mark" (Mixed FG A)

"I suppose like within a time where you can actually make a difference about it. I know obviously some tests are like 100% finals and whatever you're going to get in that you can only increase on that next semester. But in terms of continuous assessment like definitely a point where you can kinda, you've enough leeway to pick it up and make a bit of a difference to it" (Mixed FG A)

Another participant in a different group felt that learning preferences are different so engagement wasn't considered the best kind of threshold to have so it was raised whether it could be based on grades

"Could it [threshold for when to intervene] be for grades?" (4th Year FG)

Participants in two groups indicated that it would be most appropriate for an intervention to make suggestions as opposed to requiring any specific action on the part of the student and indeed, that there shouldn't be any assumptions made about what the data means, that the data should just promote a check in to see what's going on without imposing a solution.

"I think in general it needs to be a suggestion ... as opposed to a hey, you're not logging onto Sulis, just go do it" (4th Year FG)

"Just to write an email, just to check in, not try to impose anything" (4th Year FG)

"we found is that students aren't aware of the help and it's about how would make them because no one's going to go looking for help, unless there's something happens. So it's about students before breaking point happens finding help" (Mixed FG A)

"I think that would like that would always be beneficial to students at least to feel like the University cares, to reach out and make sure that I don't know that you're doing okay and like ask you, what would help you? But yeah, I think it'd be good to offer those resources, but not make it forceful" (Mixed FG B)

When asked specifically if it would be helpful for academic staff to intervene if they thought a student had a lot of potential and should be encouraged to do better, one participant expressed some concern about that:

"Should that ever happen students might feel kind of intimidated or put under more pressure... Maybe they'll be put under too much pressure and then they'll buckle you know, under all of that stress." (2nd Year FG)

Others felt that it would be welcome to be encouraged to do better, e.g.,

I think as long as it's positive, and like if the lectures emailing you because he thinks that you can be close to getting a better grade. And it's just pushing you towards that way nicely. I think that's fine. (2nd Year FG)

Yeah, like, just because they're not struggling doesn't mean that they don't need the support either, [that] they don't need a bit of kind of encouragement or motivation. (Mixed FG A)

Opt out:

Support for opt out

There was general agreement that students should have the opportunity to opt out.

"I think that these kind of hints I guess, you should be able to say, you know, 'I don't want to receive them'" (4th Year FG)

"I feel like they should always be able to refuse a support. I don't really know why. I just feel like if you're paying fees it's kind of your decision to, I don't know, fail or better yourself. So it's good to have autonomy." (Mixed FG B)

Enabling Opt out:

Various suggestions were made as to when/how opt out is best enabled. One option was to have it on a module by module basis:

"I think you should definitely be per module basis rather than an overall blanket of I agree or, I don't agree because I think every module is different. And there's some, in some modules you don't want feedback at all and in some you do" (2nd Year FG)

In terms of enabling opt out on such a module by module basis, one suggestion was to have an option on Sulis, to indicate whether you wanted feedback/support or not:

"There could be an option on sulis, like one of the tabs, or just another tab for, like, I don't know, you know, reaching out and stuff and you could just have to tick the box if you want to be contacted or if you don't want to be contacted by the lecturer for that, on every module." (2nd Year FG)

"You know, I was thinking, kind of like some kind of similar idea to that maybe like towards the end of a week, there'd be like a poll ... just a poll put up on Sulis asking if you would like to be contacted or something, just like to keep you on track of things." (2nd Year FG)

Another suggestion was that the default would be that students would automatically receive supportive interventions but would have the opportunity to specify preferences if they wanted to:

"...the default option should just be to receive all of these hints but I think you should be able to, I guess em, specify for what issues and em from whom you'd get them kind of" (4th Year FG)

Requirement to take Support

One third year student shared an interesting observation about opt out and the positives of actually being required to take the support that is offered in a particular situation:

"When I was in first year after my first semester I did quite badly in my one of my first [name of] modules. ... So they said that they actually organized like a Help Center or like a like a class every Tuesday night, in the second semester to catch you up with what we were doing the semester before, so that we wouldn't fall behind, like so much. And originally I didn't want to go to it, but it actually helped a lot in the end, and like got me back on track ... I thought it was very helpful to be honest ... I think it was mandatory" (3rd Year FG)

Others in the same Focus Group concurred:

"I think it's important to kind of push people, especially if it's something that's necessary for your entire course." (3rd Year FG)

"I've voted no for the second question, and I don't think that should be an option for students to say no [to supports offered]. I think they can I think at least come once, then they should have the option stop doing it. But I'm like at least just make the effort and come, the first time" (3rd Year FG)

However, others in the Third Year FG felt that really there was no place for having support to be mandatory and that the student's individual circumstances should always be taken into account:

"They really shouldn't force, I think every student should have the right to say no. I know like a percentage of people who fail, it's purely like an academic perspective they like could benefit from the help but like i think the support, support should be offered because someone could fail a module due to personal reasons there could be anything going on. So to say, like, you have no choice, you have to sit and go to this revision course, I think it's better to just offer help and even just check in with what's going on before forcing like all these extra courses on to the person ... you know, it's kind of a case by case basis." (3rd Year FG)

Signalling the Supports Available

This was mirrored in other groups where it was felt that interventions could simply be offered, they don't even need to flag grades or engagement or anything but simply signpost supports that are available:

*"if it was just like a general offer, like maybe at different stages throughout the year being like **if** you are failing or **if** you are not participating, maybe just someone could know subconsciously that that facility is there" (4th Year FG)*

"It could be like the mental health emails we get on Mondays, if we've ever been at the Counselling Service, I mean, I find them annoying cause I just have to delete them but sometimes I do actually read them and sometimes they are helpful kind of" (4th Year FG)

"I think it's just about making students aware that we are here to help. And the help is there. But it is up to them at the end of the day, they are adults and it's up to them to make the decision." (Mixed FG A)

And finally, another participant felt that there needed to be a suite of different resources available to students to support them based on their respective needs:

"I suppose like having resources based on different responses that the students might have [when an intervention is offered]. So maybe it's a time constraint issue, or maybe it's a mental health issue, or maybe it's just that they're not interested in the course. So maybe just having different resources to send on based on whatever the student responds" (Mixed FG B)

Training for staff to give feedback

There was a broad endorsement of the need for training to be given to teaching staff to support them in analysis of the educational data available and to support them in accommodating the results into personalised feedback for students. When asked what specifically the training should include the following headings capture what was suggested:

- *Interpersonal skills,*
- *good communication, without being arrogant or invasive;*
- *Self-awareness*
- *Learn to know how to convey that sensitive information;*
- *Know your course structure and supports available*

- *Understanding of the analytics*
- *Trauma training and emotional training*
- *connect to people a bit more, being more understanding*
- *cross cultural training*

The overall approach required for giving feedback was suggested as necessitating for example:

“to be positive, not to say that not to be all negative like you're, you're going to fail, just to say, like, you can get better. And you can get there – that kind of language” (1st Year FG)

“to do it in as sensitive and generally where as possible as to not intimidated or to insult” (1st Year FG)

“How to ask questions, how to be more sensitive towards students because maybe some lectures might not be as empathic as other lectures. So I think that every lecturer should get some sort of training” (2nd Year FG)

The need for those giving the feedback to know and understand the data such that they can explain the concern to the student was highlighted:

“I think it's important to provide evidence as well ... you don't want a situation where the person giving feedback doesn't really understand what they're talking about” (1st Year FG)

Recommendation/Suggestion

One participant suggested that an App would make it so much easier to enhance feedback to students

“but I think like an App were to be made like the staff could be like put on the App and you could like message them and they could like message you. It could be like, hey, we're noticing your grades aren't doing so well in this module... I just feel like em with the App, it's all kind of about like feedback and like through emails and stuff you're kind of talking about like the queries about like the course itself and not so much like how you're handling the course.” (Mixed FG B)

Another in the same group also felt that an App would be more user friendly for staff also to enable personalised feedback to students.

this could go like hand in hand with the App as well because so like for our labs and tutorials and stuff, sometimes they can take a list of who's there, like an attendance list and that could like be logged into the app as well. And it's more accessible for the university themselves and maybe that department and they could like monitor that and their grades and see how they're doing. And if they're not attending the tutorials and labs, maybe like get onto the student and and tell them like that they should, because it would like help with their grades. (Mixed FG B)

Feedback TO the University

For first years, in particular, they had little to know knowledge or awareness of feedback options and surveys as the focus groups were conducted too early in their University experience. For them therefore, they were invited to respond to the focus group questions hypothetically. All other focus groups were able to comment based on their experiences. All comments, from all groups are captured below.

Preliminary Discussion

In general participants thought it important to have the opportunity to give feedback. For one, it was felt important to be able to review academic staff:

"I think we should have the option to like review the lecturers and the tutors as well because sometimes if you've a bad lecturer or tutor then they could be trying to blame the students but when they're really at fault" (2nd Year FG)

Enabling Feedback

Participants identified a number of important enabling factors or enhancements to the feedback process as follows:

The Second Year group in particular felt it important to have someone you can contact other than the lecturer or tutor themselves in the event that they are the source of the problem

"if you have problems and you contact the lecture, but your problem is actually directly is with the lecture, then. I don't know. That's just, I feel like you need someone who's in the middle that you can contact" (2nd Year FG)

It was also considered important that it should be possible to give feedback anonymously:

"if there was an anonymous submissions or poll then it would be easier, more people would take part with it if they knew it was anonymous" (2nd Year FG)

"I suppose if you give negative feedback to a lecturer about the lecturer, there could always be some sort of an element of bias towards correcting grades because they know who's, they know who's emailing them so they have the identification is going to be student ID and that ID is going to be on whatever assignment and their end of semester exam. That's handed in and whether you know it or not there could be bias and you can't prove it at the end of the day, because it's them correcting it so you can never know." (2nd Year FG)

"That's my main concern [anonymity] as well. That's why I wouldn't want to email a lecturer if I had problems" (2nd Year FG)

In the first year group, it was argued that there will be more engagement with giving feedback when there is evidence that it is being listened to!

"More people will engage if they are aware that, their feedback is being listened to" (1st Year FG)

"I mean, it would be nice to get that knowledge that what we're doing is actually having an impact" (1st Year FG)

Participants in two groups also indicated that it would be helpful to know how to escalate issues in the event that nothing is done in response to feedback given or at minimum some indication that someone in authority had also seen the feedback and acknowledged that nothing can be done currently:

Whoever our class rep told like nothing happened. So if there was somebody above above that, again, that we could report that to again. (2nd Year FG)

"I think one idea is if you had someone so that it wasn't just the lecturer acknowledging they had read it [feedback] If you had feedback from like, I don't know, your course director as well, or just someone else, just to keep em responsible for someone else because like it feels like you know in our situation we were just talking to the lecturer and nothing was being done whereas I felt if the lecturer was held responsible by somebody... and you get feedback from like two sources saying like I've acknowledged that they can't actually do anything about this right now I think that would be kinda nice" (4th Year FG)

Feedback that Participants think is useful to give to lecturers about their learning experience

Participants were asked what feedback they think is useful to give to lecturers fell into a few broad categories:

Method and Approach:

Participants in the Focus Groups typically felt it important to be asked about teaching methods and styles and overall approach on the module

"Tutorial and lecture methods would be important, doing polls to see which styles they [students] like" (1st Year FG)

"I suppose some teaching methods, you'd kind of want to just raise like ... just to tell them what's working, what's not, because a lot of the time they stick to what they know and that might not be what most students would like to kind of approach the module as, you know" (2nd Year FG)

Similarly, one participant shared the view that there should be more feedback sought on how things are going online this year specifically:

"But for now, seeing as its online learning, and it's all new, they should ask like how, ways to improve it or just like in math, there's like a tutorial that we do, but it's just like, there's like 200 200 people or so in my math lecture. So it's just like all of us just joined into one kind of room, like in online and it should be more like focused in like groups of 30 or 40... cuz like it's kind of scary to type into a chat room of like 200 people whereas like 40 is much more like approachable, like a, like in college itself like tutorials are like 30 or 40 usually" (Mixed FG B)

Resources

One participant argued that academic staff should be aware of student access to recommended texts and resources

"the situation with books, like every single module has recommended texts. Like you know we pay, we pay a decent amount for you know college tuition. I don't see why like ebooks or anything, can't like be supplied to us when we need to read it for our module. Sometimes it can be ridiculous trying to find a book". (3rd Year FG)

Assessment approaches:

Participants also felt it important to be asked about assessment approaches that are used at module level, largely based on a view that assessment has spiralled this year and the overall burden is too much:

"the lecturers could do is kind of give students an option [at module level], where they could select either, ... an end of term semester exam, ... rather than doing continuous assessment" (2nd Year FG)

"Checking in about what work what's working and what's not like I have one module leader who's very good and she has checked in with us and she's willing to change like the assessment details to suit people better ..." (3rd Year FG)

Opportunities to provide feedback

Participants were also asked about what opportunities exist to provide feedback currently.

Surveys

Typically within focus groups there were multiple references to surveys, e.g.,

The emails we get to review our lecturers/modules; some modules gave us options to review the lecture; the survey, Lecturer reviews (2nd Year FG)

email surveys, polls on sulis; Surveys on email; surveys from lecturers; forum on sulis ; surveys go around each semester for each module/ lecturer; email surveys, polls on Sulis; online office hours (3rd Year FG)

Surveys mostly; surveys; Surveys, but not as many opportunities as undergrad (PG FG)

Support for Survey Approach

One participant argued that it should be mandatory for lecturers to survey students at the end of every module, apparently based on the experience in first year that not all lecturers did so:

"I feel like we should have em like a survey or something of like each module we do at the end of semester. Because I know in first year like two lecturers they did ask for feedback on like their on their module, but like they're really good like modules so mostly people felt like they weren't really needed and we needed to give feedback on other like modules" (Mixed FG B)

Another participant in the Postgraduate Focus Group had been a lecturer and found the surveys really positive:

"I think getting students feedback at the end of each module is is really valuable. em I taught modules myself and when you collect that information and make changes to your module to enhance it and to improve the quality of it, I found that personally myself as a teacher works. It works really well. So, and, yeah, I think that's important." (PG FG)

Disadvantages of Surveys:

With regard to surveys, one observation is that they are too general:

I'm thinking of the surveys we get here to evaluate individual modules, I think they're, I mean, they're generalised, there's always the same questions and it's just referring to a different lecturer. And while the multiple choice I think is easier, because you don't have to spend that much time on it, sometimes you don't really have that much to say on the individual issues but it also means that your answers are not I guess immediately relevant and then there's this answer box at the end I guess of the two sections that has and you write in, you can write in there, it's voluntary and I think it would be easier if there was like an answer box like that that you could write in for every question... because sometimes I'm just stuck between categories because I'm like this element is good, this element isn't so good and I might sometimes have more to say on it" (4th Year FG)

"I think the lecturers should be able to design their own questions. I remember those those surveys that were somehow centrally distributed. For the love of God, I couldn't think how can they be actually useful and constructive if there was something negative I had to say. It was all fine if you really liked the actual lecturer. ... they just ... didn't really ask me questions like that I found important..." (PG FG)

Other negative feedback with regard to surveys from the Post Graduate Focus Group is that they are "too general", that they should be "specific to individual module/tutor/lecturer etc" and that overall, there is an "over-emphasis on surveys".

Additional Methods of Feedback

Other types of feedback opportunities identified included the following in no particular order

- *The forum*
- *going to the lecturer directly*
- *class reps; feedback to reps and onto the council / exec*
- *some offer online office hours*
- *a lecture report - to give feedback on that specific lecture*

Forum

The forum was explained as follows:

I think there is a public forum on the Sulis site. And one of my modules lecturer, he said that you'd a bad turn out and he said send me an email and you'd better put a statement on sulis and it can be shared to anybody else, and he can, he can give the feedback to some specific [statements] ones directly. And I think it's a good way because you are anonymous, you are anonymous and no one knows you and you can you can tell the lecturer directly and he can give your feedback and others can learn from that" (2nd Year FG)

Face-to-face Feedback

One participant expressed a preference for meeting lecturers face to face for giving feedback:

I like to meet them individually. Mm hmm. Yeah. I like me to them face to face, and they can target me only yeah I like that. (2nd Year FG)

Class Reps

In multiple groups, class reps were also seen as a helpful way of giving feedback:

"I think, like, kind of having a class meeting with the class rep and just talking about like your overall experience with other people who've experienced the same thing as you and then being able to return that feedback to whoever it is that em is kindof of giving it to the lecture, or whoever ...That I think that would be very helpful, especially since there's people that you like, they're people that em kind of understand what you went through as well, if it was a bad kind of experience, I suppose. It would be like less intimidating and these are people you're familiar with, like, you don't have to hold back if you actually did go through any problems that you feel like you couldn't bring up with anyone else..." (2nd Year FG)

"I think a major step in that feedback are the class reps" (4th Year FG)

"I find them definitely more effective than any sort of survey" (4th Year FG)

"sometimes like we can, like our class reps and they'll come up, like after a few weeks with like a list of things and they'll like craft an email to a certain lecturer or like an academic after if there's like a problem with the course" (Mixed FG B)

Although one participant felt it really depends on the course you're on whether the class rep system is effective:

"I think it kind of depends on like your course and ... I'll be honest with you I don't even know if my class has class reps" (4th Year FG)

Amongst third years, a few examples were given of class reps using social media to capture views:

"We have a Facebook group online that like with all our course in it, and sometimes our class reps might put up a poll. If something in the lecture happens like we we we don't want to happen or whatever. But other than that, ... they're not really involved too much" (3rd Year FG)

"I'm class rep for my course and we have a group chat that we all text into regularly" (3rd Year FG)

In this context, some concern was also expressed about class reps using social media exclusively, with one Final year student talking about how mature students aren't on Facebook and are therefore losing out:

"There are quite a number of mature students on my course who just don't use facebook, they're not on it and that way they really can't participate in it [feedback]..." (4th Year FG)

"You do definitely have to account for people who don't use [social] media because I think it's kinda assumed that everyone these days has it but some people don't" (4th Year FG)

However, one participant shared that while class reps are a way of communicating feedback, some class reps fulfil their side of the equation but get nothing back:

"A lot of lecturers don't even answer class reps" (3rd Year FG)

Feedback Complaints

There were a few references among Third Years of feedback directly to academic staff being left unanswered:

"I also have taken it upon myself to email course director and school director and they just pass you off, no interest" (3rd Year FG)

"others [academic staff] don't answer their emails" (3rd Year FG)

"I would have liked if my course advisor had probably emailed me back" (3rd Year FG)

Examples of good practice around feedback

One final year student shared her experience on Erasmus whereby the lecturers were required to share their feedback and discuss it with the class approximately two-thirds of the way through the semester. The student considered that it had been effective, both for the student and the lecturer:

"When I was on Erasmus, the lecturers were required to talk to us about what they got for feedback and to make it available to us. And the class discussion actually helped clarify some of these things, it also didn't leave the lecturers alone with comments ..." (4th Year FG)

Recommendation/Suggestion to enhance Feedback

One participant recommended an App to enable feedback

"If they had like an app like sometimes when you go on to the different apps and kind of like there's a pop up asking you like to like review it or something. They could have like a pop up, both like how like each time you log on, how are you finding such a such a module? And then if you and then it's like, good, bad or all right and then like it could do, you can be given the option to expand on it because it might not just be the students not putting in the time, it could be the lecturer and they could like monitor their responses. And if there are a lot of them are bad it could like, they could, like contact the lecture and ask them to give like more support like simpler or better notes or something." (Mixed FG B)

It was suggested by another in the same group that surveys should be conducted earlier in the semester to enable more timely adjustments in the fact of feedback to the lecturers:

"it's like you're asking them like at the end where so it should be like kind of towards the middle where they can improve it for like last week and improve for the next people" (Mixed FG B)

And another in the same group suggested that it would be better if students could give a lecture report without the requirement of the report being the initiative of the lecturer themselves:

"I think it would be nice if that [lecture report] was just a feature that was just, it wasn't dependent on whether or not the lecturer wanted to get feedback. It would be nice if you could just provide feedback for your lectures, regardless maybe even on Sulis or something" (Mixed FG B)

And finally, it was suggested that there are other methods of feedback available that aren't being explored e.g., world café:

there are many other methodologies that are useful e.g. World café methodology (PG FG)

Responsiveness to feedback

Preliminary Discussion:

One Post Graduate shared the view that you give feedback as a kind of feedforward exercise, knowing that change takes time and in the hope that future students would benefit:

"You hope that in the best interests of future students your feedback was taken on board. It takes some time to implement change to module content" (PG FG)

Another PG participant said they expected immediate response to feedback given:

Presently, if I give feedback, I want immediate feedback. (PG FG)

One participant shared the view that the responsiveness to feedback or effectiveness of the feedback is very dependent on individual academic staff members

"I find it depends very much on the individual lecturer, I've had lecturers who you know, actually let us vote on the kinds of assessment at the beginning of the modules kind of whereas others you know, they don't react to class reps with like questions or queries at all" (4th Year FG)

Another Fourth Year student shared the experience of seeing lecturing staff respond to feedback from students via email, which resulted in amendments to the module structure, which would then be alerted to everyone via the likes of Sulis:

"I've only seen module structure really being changed, prompted by peoples emails directly to the lecturer themselves or the tutor and then you would see this email, oh, it's been brought to my attention or whatever..." (4th Year FG)

How responses to feedback can best be delivered

Participants were asked about how they would like to see their feedback responded to and how it can best be communicated back to them.

At minimum, students suggested there should at least be an acknowledgment when they bring concerns to the attention of staff:

"Expected at least acknowledgement. Yeah. So some form of engagement ... ideally a zoom call would be great because then you can literally just have a conversation and get it over with" (3rd Year FG)

"if someone emailed you back just kind of saying we recognize this was a problem issue among students. At least that they've analyzed and notice the data and kind of see what what students were saying, that's even before something's done with that, just it was picked up on." (Mixed FG A)

Others communicated similarly, they want to know whether action is going to be taken:

“I’d like to know whether, I’d like to know whether there’s going to be an action taken or not because I know we had a lecturer last year and everyone made complaints that we didn’t find her good and like nothing was done, we just had her for like the rest of the time we were meant to have her.” (2nd Year FG)

“let’s say you have a you have a lecture from your like your department head like talking about the statistics that they got say 60% of students weren’t happy this year and we are now implementing x, y and Zed changes to do with that. ...And I think like an email, a general email maybe from just the department head like to the class email could be good.” (Mixed FG A)

“I would like to be informed, full stop. That’s just informed, because sometimes you’re not even informed, that’s all I’d like to say” (PG FG)

Options for Responding to Feedback

Participants identified a number of options that the University and/or staff within it could use to respond to Feedback from students including:

- Face-to-face interaction
- Written Communication
- Social Media
- Responding in kind

Face-to-Face Responses to Feedback

One respondent in Fourth Year group said the preference would always be for face-to-face feedback, whether via zoom or in person:

“Personally I prefer being told things in person, so like via I don’t know like a zoom call or like a meeting or a class discussion or whatever” (4th Year FG)

Another in the same group felt that the best way is to actually have the opportunity to talk with lecturers about their response to e.g. module surveys:

“To actually just be able to talk to the lecturer, to say like this is what the results of our survey actually mean or we agree with your solution or we in general agree with your solution but can we change this or that aspect” (4th Year FG)

One class rep amongst the participants talked of giving feedback to the course director about a substantive issue students are facing currently. At the time of the focus group, there hadn’t been any response to the email sent. When asked what would have been a helpful response, the following was shared:

“I would have liked if my course advisor had probably emailed me back and asked to set up a meeting. And ... I would have asked a representative from each of the classes to come with me to the meeting. And then each was bring forward all the issues and then have a chat with like our lecturers and bring them in as well because, I mean, it’s just, it is like it’s a really big issue for us” (3rd Year FG)

Written responses to Feedback

Multiple participants across most Focus Groups indicated that they’d be happy with an email outlining responses to feedback:

“Personally, for me I think even an email if the lectures got all the information from our feedback and then decided ‘We're going to do this’, even if we get an email to say this is what we're gonna do in order to you know, consider what you said, Then I would, that would even be enough for me, just so I know what's being done.” (2nd Year FG)

“even just scan the email to know that you've been heard like you've, like actually doing the survey was worth your time.” (2nd Year FG)

“I think that if they put it in an email - and quoted regular questions or comments made by students and how they plan to address it or show how they have I think that would make us feel like we have been heard” (3rd Year FG)

“Maybe in an email back like a lot of times when you do surveys, you never hear kind of what the results were or what like [name] was saying kind of how changes are going to be implemented by it. So maybe if they had in the survey that you know, you tick a box that you want to get feedback on the survey or something like that.” (Mixed FG A)

“I think if they're collecting feedback to like surveys and all. And I know they're anonymous people could still like leave their email at the end of it, and they could like send out responses, thank you for the feedback and we've actually acknowledged like your complaints and all. And if they have like ways that they're fixing it right now, they could mention it. If they don't, they can say like they're working on it at least because people just want to know when they're being heard, I think.” (Mixed FG B)

“they can't just focus on each person's feedback because that would take way too much time so they could just list out on one the email like all the things they're working on and how they're going to kind of plan doing it. And there could be like a little response tab of like the students opinion and ... what they'd like to see from these upgrades.” (Mixed FG B)

“I think probably email is the most feasible in terms of the person who has to give that information ... it's probably the quickest and most acceptable form.” (PG FG)

“By an official email, you can be sure that everyone in the university has then personally received the information” (PG FG)

Another suggestion was that Sulis is the best medium to communicate feedback on the basis that everyone is using it all the time:

“I thought like if there was a notice on Sulis, like everybody can see that. I know a newsletter would be helpful, but only like a certain, I'd say a certain couple of people would see that. So the Sulis definitely would help because you're, everybody's on that, and you know it's the first thing that you go on to like” (3rd Year FG)

Social Media

And finally, examples were shared of how social media is being used effectively currently to communicate about issues that have been raised:

“I think Allison Fitzgerald, the student academic advisor she, for Student Life, in fairness and Student Life seem to communicate regularly that they're working to extend the library hours and as far as I know they are working to get more of the reading lists put as ebooks, like, I don't know is it actually you know materializing into anything, but I do think they're regularly communicate ... I see it on social media like Instagram and stuff with about the library hours being extended and stuff like that ...” (3rd Year FG)

“I think through maybe the Student Union Instagram account or Twitter like basically social media accounts would be a good way because they could, they already kind of do this. For some other topics but they could even put up like okay we had 53% of students, saying that they didn't like the way that the, I don't know, maybe that the way that the lectures were being uploaded rather

than live streamed or something and like basically show proof of that data on like the first clip and then they could then do like a video of them talking about what, what measures are taken are being taken to actually change that and improve that situation.” (Mixed FG B)

In relation to the latter, when questioned about how to also ensure students who don't use social media get access to such responses the suggestion was that there could perhaps be a website that catalogued such material:

“maybe a website like specifically dedicated to student voice matters or something”. (Mixed FG B)

Responding in Kind

Some participants suggested that the response to the feedback would best be given via the medium the original feedback was given in the first place:

“it depends how you went about telling or reporting it or whatever and like if you went to your class rep the class rep could know what the action is and let the rest of the class know then” (2nd Year FG)

“it can just be delivered, the answer, in the same way [the information was sought]. I don't think there's like one good answer, like one kind of one way that fits all.” (PG FG)

Responses to feedback when nothing can be done

In situations where the feedback can't be acted upon or an issue can't be fixed, participants were also asked how they would want such feedback communicated to them. Generally, participants felt it better to be told that nothing can be done rather than just hearing nothing.

“The same as if it was implemented! Via email or just even just a little checkup in person or via the lecture in the lecture hall or in the zoom or something”. (1st Year FG)

“if it's something that actually would have had a significant effect for a number of people, then it should be addressed properly and in accordance to the magnitude of the thing that the response was about” (1st Year FG)

“Our class reps would tell us like they weren't able to do this or they weren't able to do that. ... Or even an email. This is honest, we are informed of what they can do and what they are doing and what they're not doing” (2nd Year FG)

“I would prefer to be told you've been heard we can't do anything about it, rather than just hearing nothing!” (4th Year FG)

Consent and Ownership of Data

Participants were advised that, at the moment, data is collected but not necessarily visible by everyone in the University.

Preliminary Discussion

In the context of ownership of data collected, among the post graduate focus group there was a high degree of consensus that most of that data would require consent even to be collected, e.g.,

"I would personally think for all of that data that that you've listed there [financial data or socio economic data or it could be your progression data] We should be given the opportunity to say whether or not we want that collected. Absolutely." (PG FG)

Participants among the postgraduates felt that no one should have access to their data or at best, only limited people for whom they specifically gave consent:

"For me, I would have a preference for just myself and I have very good relationship with my supervisor and I even would say no. Actually, I would prefer her not being able to see that because yeah I don't really see it as being very relevant to what we are working on together ..."

"I would say its personal. So it should remain like I can, I should be the only one to see it."

"Only whoever a specially give consent to And I'd likely say no in most cases" (PG FG)

Postgraduate participants also highlighted their concern at all the data that is currently being collected indicating that they hadn't really been aware of same and that it seems to indicate quite an issue for the University around informed consent:

"It's quite interesting, I think, actually, because just with GDPR or regulations and all of these things that we as researchers have to go through. It's really unusual that we, this is for a lot of us, this is actually news to us that all this data has been collected. So I think that's actually quite powerful. The fact that we weren't even aware of this and that really highlights the importance of informed consent, that we need to be given that adequate information to make that decision ourselves." (PG FG)

This led to an interesting point being made by a post graduate about when do you really have consent to say no and what are the consequences of same, e.g.,

"Like basically the consent should be available when you, when you actually have a real option to say no. And I'm just always worried that if you provide this consent will it be just like you know online shops that basically if you don't tick the option, then you cannot buy or you cannot use the services?" (PG FG)

Further this discussion led to the query being raised as to whether the University has data controllers in place and whether staff who work with the data are bound by an ethical code of conduct.

"Does the University have data controllers?... And are they bound by an ethical code of conduct?" (PG FG)

In the event that such controls are in place, one PG participant felt that it was ok for aggregate data to be used, so long as the students' identity is protected:

"Like most people when it comes to data we're pretty much fine as long as it there's no link, direct link back to us. I'm not, I have no problem with my data being used for the greater good, with being used to make other people's lives easier. I just, I just don't want any links back to me. I think that's reasonable. So fair exchange. ... And as long as it's been done with a code of conduct in

place and with, you know, under like full compliance with the law, I have no issues with it.” (PG FG)

Participants in Mixed Focus Group A indicated that knowing who has access to what data is very confusing for students:

it's kind of like difficult to know who actually has your data or who has to grant what permissions to be able to other people see your data it can definitely get over your head, a small bit (Mixed FG A)

Further, they felt that it would be helpful to know what the data is used for, who has access to it and what it will be used for:

“who has your data, like where it can be passed on to, what permissions you have with it and all. Maybe like just even like if you're collecting your data just being straight up or just kind of knowing what it can be can be or will it be used for, very clearly, like there's a bit of crypticness to it.” (Mixed FG A)

Another in the same group concurred:

“I suppose it would be handy to know what departments actually have access to” (Mixed FG A)

Access to individual student's data

Participants were asked who they thought should be granted the right to view their data and whether they should be made aware of such access being granted. In general it can be argued that participants found it hard to identify anyone specifically, without prompting, who should be granted access to their data, the only suggestion being volunteered tentatively being:

“Maybe your course director” (Mixed FG A)

Options for handling access to data

One suggestion was that all data would be handled by a central department that manages all of it:

“[There] Probably should be like a a department dedicated to it, maybe like HR or something.” (Mixed FG B)

And another felt that such a department's focus should be enhancing the student's overall experience:

“like the team should be, like the department should be focused on like specific ways to improve the student's life within the university so they should be only granted the data that they need, that's essential for just helping them.” (Mixed FG B)

And further, that this team would coordinate student supports, because the lecturers don't need to know and already have enough on:

“lectures shouldn't know that [eg that a student is in Counselling] the team that is managing all that data should because then they can, like, help that specific student in like by reading all their data rather than the lecturer couldn't like just help themselves because they have a lot on like” (Mixed FG B)

And then if this team were to want to share information with anyone else, they'd have to ask the students' permission:

“And then if they would like to share data with the lecturer someone then [from the department/team] they go to that student and like ask them, Is that okay, like get permission” (Mixed FG B)

A related suggestion from a participant in another group was that data should be aggregated by specialists who know how to interpret it and they’d then flag issues to appropriate staff/others within the organisation who could appropriately reach out to an individual student:

“Maybe there'd be like a special team, you know, like a like a special team who would like be allowed to look at all like all the data that UL collect and then like analyse it you know write summaries, whatever, and then make that available to em, and then make their findings available to like the lecturers, to have a bit of a filtration system for. So, you know, keep the thing, keep everything anonymous They do like when first years come in and then there's like second years like bring them around and they have to meet up with them, like every week or whatever. Like maybe we get a flag to them and they could have a chat with them. So it's like, like one their peers actually talking to them.” (3rd Year FG)

Another suggestion was that all the analytics could be automated and flagged to the individual student first if there was a concern and the student would then have the option to reach out for help if they felt they needed it:

“I just imagine it as like the systems are running and it's collecting the data and then only when a certain like delta of your grades have gone down, say by 10%, then that automates the system to send an email to you, you. And it's like, ‘Oh, you want to meet up with someone, or do you not? Like, ‘yeah, I want to have someone’ and then it gets passed on to an actual person, it doesn't go, person to person, it's just all automated and sits inside of the cloud, the data center. ... then it gets passed on to you first so you're in control of whether people see your data or not.” (3rd Year FG)

Limits on Access to Data:

The vast majority of participants felt access to data should be limited one way or another

“I think it should be on a need to know basis.... I don't think it would be a very good idea of just from a privacy or whatever standpoints for students. If my information is available to the whole faculty, the whole time. I wouldn't like that.” (1st Year FG)

“You should be in control of your own data I think” (1st Year FG)

“there's a certain line that I personally don't think should be crossed when em sharing our personal information... I suppose em kind of academically, our results and like progression. I suppose that could be definitely something that should be shared among our just lectures or maybe possibly you know, future career, careers, jobs, whatever. Maybe, but, um, yeah, aside from that, I don't really know if I personally like to have a lot of my information shared. (2nd Year FG)

“You should be able to know all of your data, but people who are using it, shouldn't, should only be able to see what's relevant. For the lecturer example you gave, I think it's not helpful for them to know if you have a Suzi grant or not, especially as it might cause judgment I guess” (4th Year FG)

“I don't think there's such a simple simple answer. There definitely should be certain categories of data and different access to different people for that.” (PG FG)

Sharing data externally

In one group participants expressed concern around whether data could be sent/sold outside the organisation, e.g.,

"If it [data] was being used for like with good intent intent than yeah but if it's being sold off to other companies and stuff I don't really think about that would be okay." (Mixed FG B)

Others felt that data leaving the University would be ok if it was be a requirement for students to be asked and give consent for any data that would travel outside of the organisation:

"ask, if I'm let know then that's fine. And I can opt out, and that's okay" (2nd Year FG)

"as long as information travels within UL I'm okay with it. But if they're giving my information somewhere outside of us even, even [to] employers. I don't know if I would be okay with that. Yeah, without my permission." (2nd Year FG)

"I think my data can be used by important personnel in the University but not any other body and yes, I think my consent should be sought." (PG FG)

Requirement for Consent:

One participant argued that the issue of consent was paramount and expressed concern about any data being amalgamated about an individual, whether by the system or by specialists:

Like if you're all right to consent to that, that's absolutely fine. But I wouldn't like to be in a situation where an automated email was made out to me that they saw my grades, they saw all the data that had come around ... As long as it was given consent at the first place for them to even look at it, even to have it automated, then I'd be fine. (3rd Year FG)

In the Fourth Year group the view was that all data that is stored requires consent:

"I think all the data that they store, if they want to use it they have to have, get our consent" (4th Year FG)

Explicit/Further Consent

Participants were also asked whether there are any types of data for which the university should obtain explicit/further consent from students in order to share it with other departments? There was a range of responses, from 'it depends!' to specifying particular circumstances when consent should be an assumed requirement, e.g.,

"It always depends because not all students would want personal data to be viewed by anyone else so everyone should have the option to opt to never let anyone access ones own data as they have the right to it because its their own and no-one elses" (1st Year FG)

For some, a clear demarcation line in terms of requiring consent is anything that isn't viewed as academic or that was considered personal

"Anything non academic I think" (2nd Year FG)

"I guess just like identifying personal details like you're I think you can put your PPS number on the student portal and like your address and stuff." (Mixed FG B)

When asked specifically whether data around their mental or physical health, which might be impacting on academic attainment, should be shared within the institution, the response from one participant who self-disclosed challenges with mental health, was in the negative:

"I've like struggled with mental health, but, um, I wouldn't really want my, I wouldn't really want other people to know, aside from the people I've told. Unless it is me specifically, who is telling these people that I am like, you know, struggling with my mental health or something ... I wouldn't want like a second party, you know, doing it for me. That's kind of like a personal thing,

that's something I consider very personal to me and very important to my like, privacy really.” (2nd Year FG)

Problems that can arise when data is being shared:

One Fourth Year Focus Group participant shared a cautionary tale about the negative impact of one service being aware of their academic performance, their consent was given to share this example.

“I have gone to the Counselling Service in UL a couple of times, and I was going two years ago, just going through a rough patch and I'd built a rapport with this lady and like three sessions in she asked me if eh my issues were affecting my academic grades. And they weren't, because I was doing really, really well. [she told me] she couldn't see me because I was doing really well in College and “I should seek help elsewhere” ... she kind of made the impression that the counselling service in UL was just specifically for people who were doing like badly, if their issues were affecting their grades. But I found that to be like huge, I thought that was very strange... But from my impression of it I just thought ok, I can't go to the Counselling Service in UL ... I don't think they should be correlated, ... just because you're doing really well doesn't mean things are good behind it all. And equally, like you could be doing really bad and things could actually be grand, you're just like not bothered, so I don't think it's related.” (4th Year FG)

Use of Predictive Analytics

Regarding predictive analytics, participants were advised that data could be used to make predictions based on background and past performance in examinations and grades and which could inform interventions and supports. Participants were asked if they think this is helpful or not?

One participant shared the view that it's helpful but that they'd need to have the person's consent in advance as to whether they wanted to receive offers of help etc based on their analytics:

“I think that's helpful but they need to ask for consent from the person first, like if they want to receive that kind of like targeted like help” (Mixed FG B)

There was quite a strong view expressed by first years at least that predictive data shouldn't be taken too seriously. Other groups also felt that you can't really put too much trust in predictive analytics, there are always exceptions:

“I think you should use the predictive data with a grain of salt because everyone's different. And you know, like there's there's plenty of examples of people from lower socio economic backgrounds being geniuses”. (1st Year FG)

“Yeah, nobody should be judged by their background” (1st Year FG)

“I suppose you can't paint everyone with the same brush you can't really base it off your background” (1st Year FG)

“I don't think that would be fair to based on where they're from, or their ethnicity or their culture to make an assumption on how well they're going to do in the university.”...” I don't think it will be fair to make assumptions based on people's records” (Mixed FG A)

One participant in the first year group felt the analytics might be useful for the lecturer to have to inform themselves about a student, but not to use it to inform any particular action/intervention:

“Think it would be good for like lectures, their own reference, but not to contact you. But for them to themselves. If something's going wrong maybe they can think about what the reason could be” (1st Year FG)

Autonomy

Opportunity to Opt-out

Participants were asked whether the University should allow them to opt out of some data collection in particular circumstances, i.e., that there could be mandatory data collection for the purposes of university business and that other surveys would be opt in or opt out.

Preliminary Discussion

In this context, one observation from the PG focus group was that opt out was actually like an extension of consent:

“In terms of opt outs, I suppose, it's just a continuation of consent as well. I suppose if something big changes you if they're changing how the data is going to be used or how it's going to be processed you need to kind of renew the consent. And that's why the opt out is there.” (PG FG)

One participant questioned whether Student Union and Student Life surveys would be considered formal/official, with the implication being that it'd be important that they would be, especially as they take feedback on things that impact the overall student experience:

“I just want to ask like student, Student Life, like Student Union kind of surveys would they be official? ... I just wanted to ask because sometimes they do surveys on like non like academic thing stuff like what kind of events people like and all and people still want to answer those. Even though they're not formal because it effects like their enjoyment. Like, at school and stuff” (Mixed FG B)

There was also a sense of frustration expressed by one participant that the University, in formal surveys, is asking for the same information of students over and over again:

Seems like a lot of people are looking for the same information. And, and, again, you're just being asked to complete the same kind of survey, that could be cut down. (3rd Year FG)

Support for Opt out

There was unanimous consensus among first years that an opt out from unofficial surveys should be available. Among other groups, responses were a bit more nuanced, there was an awareness that as final year students one might be needing input to surveys! There was also a feeling that one can just ignore the requests, e.g.,

“...I know if I was doing like a survey in my final where I'd need people to do the survey so not sure [about opt out]” (2nd Year FG)

“I just think we can ignore the surveys that we don't want to do. I don't mind getting the email” (2nd Year FG)

“they don't even take up much space in the inbox anyways... I wouldn't even need an option to opt out of any of the emails.” (2nd Year FG)

“As FYPs we need to send out those surveys because we won't get participants otherwise” (4th Year FG)

Recommendation/ suggestion

One suggestion was that surveys could be flagged or colour coded in some way so that students know what's formal and informal e.g.,

“I'd like to see which ones are surveys just clearly indicated just so it's like easy enough for all of us to [find] them” (2nd Year FG)

"You don't know if this is like a survey about your module. Like, if this is an important survey" (2nd Year FG)

"as I mentioned, the emails, there is a lot of them so it's hard ... when your inbox is quite full. So maybe even have like a different section of our email just that them emails go into" (Mixed FG B)

Another suggestion was to have the opportunity to sign up for the emails you want to receive that are not essential:

"Just a list on Sulis that you can tick the boxes of what emails are relevant to you" (3rd Year FG)

Another enhanced the suggestion to say that such a tick box could be something that you could periodically review:

"that's a great idea having like a checkbox, because I think when you come into first year you sign up for everything because you're afraid to miss stuff but maybe have a chance to review that in second year or something" (3rd Year FG)

Another suggestion was to have a website one could go to to sign up for the informal student, post-grad and staff surveys etc:

"It might be more helpful to encourage people to look at a website where all of these were listed" (4th Year FG)

Opportunity to refuse support offered

There was also unanimity among first years that one should be able to refuse any help offered. In other groups there was more nuance.

One suggestion is that students would actually opt in to such supports eg. at the start of a new semester, or in First Year:

"I do think that definitely should be opt in, at the start. And I think what's what's really important for this would be that they're very well informed at the start, as to what they're opting in, for and that it's their, their personal choice whether or not they want that." (PG FG)

Others suggested that they'd welcome the option to opt out but that it should be sought regularly as you might change your mind over time, e.g.,

"I'd like an option for that. But also, like, I don't want to be contacted at the moment because maybe my decision might change later on." (2nd Year FG)

"Yes, but then also if you think about it like some students would think, oh yeah, I'll be grand, like, like, I won't need any help, and then it comes down the line that they will and they might be too stubborn to go and get that help unless they're pushed like not pushed but like, kinda helped along by UL by saying like, oh, we recommend such and such. So like they need to think about like there should be like a check in every couple of weeks or something just to ensure that the student still doesn't want to be offered help by UL" (Mixed FG B)

Based on this another participant suggested you could have a kind of unsubscribe button at the bottom of email communications:

"I think they could just include like at the bottom of each email or message like an unsubscribe kind of button like the way when you get emails from like signing up to shops like and subscribe to the monthly email" (Mixed FG B)

A final year student also suggested caution about having an opt out available early on in one's studies:

"I can see that as a maybe a bad thing because obviously someone at the start of the year could obviously say I'm all, I'm I'll be fine. But then maybe get into difficulty later" (Mixed FG A)

Amongst those in the postgraduate focus group on the other hand, there seemed to be just bemusement at the very idea that the University would be engaging with students so proactively and to what end?

I, I don't really like I don't, I'm not sure what we're talking about? Are we talking about someone from university ringing and basically behaving like Amazon recommending another book for me? ... Like, first of all, where would they get those people from? Like, like if anything anybody has too much work in university. Like what would they hire a new department of Data Analytics only so that they would be bugging us with saying oh last year around this season you were using library. Would you like to come tomorrow? I wish, I seriously, I just don't know what are we talking about here?" (PG FG)

Contact by phone or email and opportunity to opt out of same

In terms of whether they would want to be contacted by phone or email and whether there should be an opt out from such contacts the following were the views:

"I think when it comes to the phone on your personal devices, then yes, definitely you should be able to opt out. But when it's the university email I think there should, I think you should have the right to refuse the email as well, but I think the university should be able to just send you an email saying, hey, this is what we've seen. ... if you want to talk about it here we are." (1st Year FG)

Another suggested that it would be helpful to have an option around how you could be contacted. For many students it seems, they would rather not be contacted by phone:

"I think as well you should have the option of how you're going to be contacted like because I wouldn't mind being contacted by like email but I wouldn't want to be contacted by like phonecalls" (2nd Year FG)

"Yeah, I think people should be allowed to opt out of it. Like I would certainly take the face to face of the call, just because I find that easier but some people aren't uncomfortable with that" (3rd Year FG)

There was also a suggestion that there should be a time lapse before the institution would intervene based on data observed:

"I think there should be like a time limit on how long, like let's say the whatever they call is the need for intervention, whether it be low grades are just not being online on the Sulis like that there should be a link to time. Let's say its under two months that it will be going on for before they contact you. So in case it was any social things or personal things at home that you were just a one off thing and you didn't really want to be contacted during that time that did allow for that reason by not contacting you for a month or two." (1st Year FG)

There was also a suggestion that perhaps student progression should be forwarded to the Academic advisor, who would be able to see if the issue was related to one module or many and could determine an appropriate time to intervene:

"I think such feedback from modules, like if you are doing terrible in them, should be passed on to your academic advisor and if you're struggling with one of them the academic advisor would not engage but if she gets, if he or she gets eh like an email from every lecturer from your course

saying 'ok, he is not participating' or 'he is very, he is struggling a lot', that is when the academic advisor engages, so you're only engaged once, by one person, not by every lecturer" (4th Year FG)

In such circumstances, there was a perception also that it could be very onerous for academic advisors if all decisions about when/how to intervene are placed on them:

"That passes a lot of responsibility on to your advisor for I guess an adult human being" (4th Year FG)

Additional feedback provided

Most Focus Groups ended with a question as to whether participants had anything further to add. Responses were grouped under the following headings

Data after Graduation

One participant asked pertinent question about the use of data after a student has graduated, whether it can still be used by the University and whether it is still anonymised in that context:

“So one thing that I had thought of was after a student leaves is that data kept still? And even if even if they do like keep anonymous data could that anonymous data still be like analyzed and it’s basically like no longer anonymized?” (Mixed FG A)

Data Management

Some Fourth Year students flagged concerns about how data is managed at UL

“I think in terms of the data, one thing UL really lacks is anonymising their things. So, for example, we’ve had cases where a lecturer will just put up student numbers and then the result they got for a test so everybody can just easily go in and see. But the thing is, using student numbers is not anonymous at all. I can go into outlook, I can just type in a student number and I can see exactly who that person is. So if they’re using the same kind of system for their data storage, I think that will be really bad, it’d be very easy to ... pin point who is who if they’re using student numbers.” (4th Year FG)

“On that point, on one of our courses we’re using a website [named as the module number and lecturer’s name], like the lecturer posted a website. And at one point he posted all the results on that website, also with ah student numbers. I think technically, anybody, even from outside of UL can access that. I don’t like that. ...so the idea of making your result, even semi public, it’s a concern.” (4th Year FG)

It was felt that Sulis does provide a solution to this latter problem, that is has a grade and assignment section which would be kept individually for every student, but the perception was that many lecturers don’t use that and rather post a file with everyone’s information on it.

Online teaching

In the context of online teaching, first year students fed back a number of suggestions that would enhance the experience for them: lectures recorded on camera; slower pace for new content and make the sessions more interactive.

“I think especially in today's learning environment at home. I think lecture should try and have cameras for their lectures for their pre recorded lectures. ... it's very, very hard to pay attention to the screen with a disembodied voice in the background with notes upon notes.” (1st Year FG)

“I think lecturers should slow down in delivering material for first years. Its difficult to learn off the recordings” (1st Year FG)

“I think it would be helpful if it was more interactive as well it’d be better” (1st Year FG)

“I think the polls are a very good idea. They're a very good idea because like the worst thing I found from the online learning so far is the fact that the lectures don't know how we're all doing and if we understand” (1st Year FG)

Second years suggested that in the context of online teaching, it is much more helpful to have a few shorter videos rather than one long one, bite sized chunks seem more accessible:

"I think some lectures should not make their lecture videos long. I feel like it would be easier to break down the information when the lecturer videos are like 20 minutes I'd rather two 20 minutes than one 45 minute. Lecturers, some lecturers put almost the whole week's worth into one when we wouldn't even be learning it through one [lecture], we'd be learning it through two anyways. And I don't know, I feel like it's easier to learn things when it's three 15 minutes than one 45 minute" (2nd Year FG)

Another suggestion from Second Years was around limiting continuous assessment and giving students some choice in assessment methods at module level:

"I suppose one thing that the lecturers could do is kind of give students an option, where they could select either, not just as an individual student, but kind of as a cohort they could suggest as a module, they could do an end of term semester exam, especially with everything going on, rather than doing continuous assessment because some people are working. They're working in retail and all that. Between working in retail and college, there's just no hours to study in between, get assignments done with everything going on. We've five modules at least and if there's continuous assessment modules you're piled up the whole time. You're just, your mental health will go down the drain like" (2nd Year FG)

And in another groups a participant suggested that the module surveys are not sufficiently nuanced for the virtual experience:

"seeing as its online learning and it's all new they should ask like how, ways to improve it" (Mixed FG B) [see full quote in section on feedback above]

Participants in the second year focus group also raised the issue of group feedback and how that is handled. One shared the view that in group work, where it is clear that one person isn't pulling their weight it warrants a lecturer or tutor intervening and contacting that person:

"I think like group feedback is very important as well. Like just say one individual in a group isn't doing enough and the rest of the students are going to struggle as a result, I think it's fair that at that point, like a lecturer or like someone over that module could contact them, because if it means they're going to bring down other people it's not really like fair" (2nd Year FG)

It was also suggested in the Second Year group that it would be helpful in group work if members of the group reviewed each other as part of the process:

"I don't know if we do this in UL but in UCD. They actually when they do group work they review, each peer reviews and other peer. I don't know if that's good or not, but I know that that's what they do and be an option. I know if I was being reviewed by my peers, I would try to do more for sure" (2nd Year FG)

"You should be able to opt out of group work when we're remote learning because it can actually be really hard. And especially when you're in second year third year or fourth year where your grades matter and your grades are dependent on another person who just won't even reply to you for a week. So I don't know. I think lectures to take into consideration that group work is a lot harder than doing work by yourself." (2nd Year FG)

Request for more reading resources to be made available online as ebooks or PDFs:

"the recommended texts that they that they're giving are all books that I can't get online and I would really like if there were maybe ebooks or PDFs, or whatever it is, from the library" (3rd Year FG)

Support for students during Covid

Students in the Fourth Year focus group were highly complimentary of the way in which UL has responded to Covid and how they have been treated and supported over the past year.

“I’ve never felt like I’m a number on a course [at UL], especially throughout Covid, I’ve had nothing but a positive experience with my course... I feel like UL have allocated things out correctly” (4th Year FG)

One post-graduate student was also very complimentary but asked that efforts be made to enable as much interaction as possible for international students in Semester 2, as there is only one year to be in Ireland!

“With everything going online, I still feel a part of the University staying at home... I don’t know if for international students there is something that could be done better because this is my only chance to interact, at an international forum... and it gives me unrest sometimes to believe that my whole year here would be online in front of the computer” (4th Year FG)

Unsolicited Feedback on Social Media

One student raised the query whether UL monitors feedback that is posted on various social media, not necessarily formal sites, but which contain feedback nonetheless:

“does UL pay attention to social media feedback? Because sometimes it doesn't really feel like they do. Like people are just kind of saying things online and like they might be getting a lot of traction. But there's no response to it. ... I know that there's like a student confessions page on Twitter, which is completely anonymous and it, whoever is the admin for it, will just put out things that get sent in. And some of them will get like a lot of likes. And also just like if UL is being tagged in posts on twitter on Instagram, or even just comments underneath the posts that UL put out themselves, Cos I have, like seen, I think that the UL Twitter like the official UL Twitter account has actually blocked the UL confessions account. I don't know, that kind of shows to me that maybe the university doesn't care that much about what people might actually think in like an unfiltered setting.” (Mixed FG B)

Preliminary Analysis

In all a total of 7 Student Focus groups were conducted between 18 and 23 November 2020, with 47 students across all undergraduate and postgraduate years of study participating overall.

Transparency

It is clear from the focus group discussions that students generally are surprised at the volume and variety of the data being collected on them, not just in the virtual learning environment but across all data collection points. This suggests that there needs to be extensive communication around this, with students being clearly informed as to what data is collected.

By third year, within minutes of seeing the data collection points, participants in focus groups were asking questions about who had access to the data being captured on them and whether their consent is being sought. The issue of consent was raised a number of times without prompting from the facilitator and students in later years, particularly post-graduates, raised the issue of informed consent. In first year, perhaps due to their experiences of having to provide lots of data when applying to third level and also because of their intense experiences in the virtual learning environment, there's a sense of their not being surprised about all the data being captured.

By later years however, they're indicating surprise at what's being captured and wondering if they've given informed consent for same? Amongst post graduate participants in particular there was a lot of concern that informed consent is not being sought in their experiences to date. There was also a sense that you cannot simply be asked to give blanket consent to all this data being collected and used but that the more sophisticated one gets with capturing data on an individual student's journey the more progressive and frequent there need to be opportunities to give informed consent for the capture and use of that data.

In one group in particular, participants were concerned about the anonymity of UL data specifically and examples were given of ways in which student numbers and data like student grades seem to be routinely shared in ways that do not protect students' identities nor anonymity.

Purpose

Participants in the focus groups perceived legitimate purpose for the use of data in each of the following broad areas:

- To improve the University's service quality
- To improve the educational experience in a module/course/programme and
- to improve individual students' educational experience

There was clear evidence of increased concern about the uses of data, the purposes to which it could appropriately be put and whether and how one could interpret the data available as students progress through their academic studies. In general, students expressed the need for clarity around uses to which the data is put and/or inferences taken from such data, e.g. in terms of how engagement data is interpreted and whether they are graded based in all or in part on it.

By third year, students were beginning to say that the data analytics should be being used more to support them collectively e.g. enhance the student experience (in terms of integrating student travelling requirements to and from University or employment activities reflected in timetabling) and enable them to make more informed choices (e.g. data on graduate outcomes, linked to information about courses studied and whether they are good choices for the career options they student wants) or to make sure that there were sufficient copies of core texts available in the library or as ebooks. There was also a frustration that the University isn't joining up the dots on the data it

holds and there was a perception that different unit/departments keep asking students for information that the University already holds on them. This was not related to particularly personal data, but simply e.g., the fact of being a registered student at UL! This would appear to suggest that in providing their data, students expect a more sophisticated quid pro quo that such data will be analysed and used to enhance their experiences as students at the university.

Broadly speaking, there is support for using the analytics as aggregate data, e.g. to enhance services, plan opening hours etc, but if there's going to be any kind of individual/personal application or associations made from the data there is a perception that formal consent is required for that.

Use of data to support educational need

In general, students identified two main ways in which data could be used to support their educational needs:

- to improve your overall learning experience and wellbeing
- to alert teaching staff early if you are at risk of failing a module or if you could improve your learning.

Students did talk about the impact of data on the relationship with teaching staff or tutors but in general perceived that access to personal data could actually damage relationships.

No students identified the following two potential uses of data:

- Identify the most successful pathway through your studies;
- present you with a complete profile of your learning in each and every module

Participants also indicated that the use of data analytics was not just about academic attainment and progression but also about enhancing the broader student experience.

Overall, concern was expressed here again in relation to issues around consent for use/access to data, and whether the purpose and use of the data was clearly known and understood by all. The validity of engagement data in particular was also questioned.

Feedback to Students

Options for receiving feedback that were discussed included in-person feedback, written feedback and visuals/dashboards.

All were seen as having pros and cons and in-person feedback in particular was seen as having significant resource implications for the University and the question was raised as to whether it was likely to be implemented in any large-scale way as a result.

Written feedback was seen as having the advantage of being documented and that one could track progress over time. The disadvantage was that it can be hard to understand sometimes or to generalised to be meaningful.

First years, perhaps because they were launched intensively into the virtual learning environment, were more aware of the types of analytics available in Sulis or Moodle, higher years seemed less aware and post graduates almost not at all.

By those who were familiar with them, dashboards were generally viewed as highly suspect and open to gamification. Their use as a tool for providing feedback had mixed response. While many felt the dashboards provide a useful oversight, particularly when one is shown performance against the

aggregate/cohort, there with multiple expressions of concern that it could add to student anxiety. One helpful suggestion was that dashboards could be something one would opt into and would not be seen automatically.

When discussing dashboards specifically, reference was sometimes made to the data being provided via an App so it may be necessary to look at how such info will be provided to students for ease of access.

Student groups saw potential for using platforms like Sulis to give and receive feedback in a timely fashion, especially at module level and limiting any benefit to the Module Satisfaction Survey. Students also expressed frustration at repeatedly answering the same questions for module level surveys.

In terms of receiving feedback from the University on issues they had reported or commented upon, students indicated that they always wanted some kind of response. In general, they were open to this being communicated via any or all routes – in person, email, newsletter, students saw a positive role for social media as an option for providing an update on broad based or service-based issues. Positive examples were given of e.g. Student Life using platforms like Instagram to communicate on topics like library opening hours, use of ebooks etc. Positive examples were also given of effective communication via social media by class representatives. However, a caution was also flagged that social media channels are not a panacea and that provision definitely also needs to be made for people for whom this is not an accessible or used channel.

Where feedback was personal to them in the context of their academic journey, students expressed concern that feedback via email can get lost in their inbox and were typically not keen to receive contact via phone (text ok but not a call). Instead they preferred the idea of notifications being flagged via the likes of Sulis or an App with signposting to supports available.

Intervention

Typically participants favoured intervention on the part of the University. However, there was a sense that you can't make assumptions about individual needs or the most appropriate support, so such intervention is probably best being tentative and suggestive rather than directive in most cases. There was some discussion about when is the best point to initiate an intervention, e.g., based on engagement data, within specific timeframes, on the basis of grade. Students generally do not tend to welcome contact via phone, certainly not face-to-face phone calls and give a clear indication that they'd want the opportunity to opt-out of same.

There was general agreement that students should be allowed to opt out of interventions. However, there was some evidence of students being more open to embracing the supports offered as they progressed through their studies, largely because they'd seen and experienced the benefits of those supports either personally or among their peers. This suggests that if there is an opt-out option, students need the option to regularly revisit same, with suggestions that it could be on a module by module basis via Sulis, or by semester and also that surveys regarding particular needs could include an opt-in for follow up.

There was some support for having automated flags within platforms like Sulis to flag issues and signpost the resources available, inviting students to make contact as desired. And there was perceived potential in one group for using an App to communicate feedback, which was perceived as potentially more user friendly for both staff and student.

There was a broad endorsement of the need for training to be given to teaching staff to support them in analysis of the educational data available and communicating the results into personalised feedback for students. There was also support for staff to receive training on the interpersonal communication skills required for giving feedback effectively.

Feedback TO the University

For first years, the focus group came too early in the semester for them to have had much experience of giving feedback to the University.

In terms of enabling feedback, there was broad support for the requirement for it to be anonymous an explicit requirement that it be responded to in some capacity. A number of students also reported giving feedback to teaching staff either directly or as part of a survey or initiative taken by class reps to which they got no response. In such circumstances, they requested clear pathways for escalating issues of concern.

There were multiple references to surveys as one of the main means of giving feedback, with the MSS in particular coming in for criticism (not referred as MSS but identified as the survey for individual modules). It was regarded as too generalised to be useful. There was some suggestion that module surveys are continuing currently but are not sufficiently nuanced to the virtual environment, which is seen as unhelpful given that everything is online currently.

Other means of giving feedback that were identified included: the forum and lecture reports (on Sulis); contacting the lecturer directly, class reps and office hour. It was also suggested that additional means exist but aren't being used, e.g. world café.

There was general frustration that feedback requests come too late in the semester for changes to be made for the cohort involved and frustration at lack of responsiveness altogether.

In terms of responding to feedback, students identified the following as options, all of which are welcome and there was no particular preference overall:

- Face-to-face interaction;
- written communication, including email and notifications on e.g. Sulis
- social media and
- responding in kind, i.e., if feedback was written, the response could be written etc.

Consent and Ownership of Data

Postgraduate students in particular raised concerns about consent and ownership of data and raised pertinent questions around whether the University has data controllers in place and if so, whether they are bound by an ethical code of conduct. In general, the longer a student was at the University the more concern they expressed on the topic of consent and ownership of data.

Broadly speaking, participants were more relaxed about use of data in aggregate form. As may be anticipated, they expressed particular concern about who had access to any data that was personal in nature and /or could identify the individual. It is worth noting, that referencing students by their student number was not seen as a secure way of hiding their identify. One suggestion was that data would be handled by a centralised department with responsibility for same and that department would aggregate data and share any personal data only after getting student consent for same.

Participants were also concerned about the possibility of use of predictive analytics. First years in particular felt that predictive data shouldn't be taken too seriously and other groups also pointed to the exceptions in any likely prediction based on background or previous academic achievement.

Autonomy

While there was unanimous consensus among first years for the option to opt out from unofficial surveys, almost all other groups felt that it was a bit more nuanced that that, with final year students in particular being sensitive to the fact that they are likely to be doing final year projects that required survey input and therefore they'd need others to be willing to fill them in! In general, the consensus was more in favour of keeping access to surveys open, with one helpful suggestion being to colour code non-University business survey so they are more easily identifiable as non-essential or to have a sign-in option on Sulis or on a website if you wanted to engage.

Opt out from supports offered was also unanimously favoured by First years but was more nuanced amongst more senior years. Participants who favoured the option to opt-out did request that optout would be periodically revisited in the event that students changed their minds about same.

In terms of being contacted by phone, there is some evidence that students would prefer not to be called directly on the phones.

Where there was the opportunity for additional feedback at the end of the Focus groups, participants to the opportunity to raise the following:

- Whether and how student data is used by the University after a student has graduated
- Concern as to how the University protects access to and anonymises student data
- Suggestions for enhancing online teaching
- Request for more reading resources to be made available online as ebooks or PDFs:
- Complimenting the level of support for students during Covid
- Harnessing the insights provided through unsolicited feedback on Social Media

Some Facilitator Observations

The issue of consent and informed consent needs to be clearly addressed and communicated, including in any policies arising from this work.

The purposes to which the University intends to put data collected, the controls on access, assurances around confidentiality and anonymity and the limitations on use inside and outside the organisation all need to be clearly identified and communicated to both staff and students.

Use of data analytics to inform interventions with individual students is perhaps best undertaken at a programme level, where data across multiple modules can be compared and analysed in order to build a fuller picture. At least two successful interventions at First Year level were described by both students and staff and perhaps point a way forward for using engagement data and progression data in positive and impactful ways.

It is perhaps interesting to note that the above two interventions were described as practices that were long standing in terms of monitoring first years in large classes to ensure they were transitioning well to third level, and that the use of the data analytics aided and enhanced the intervention in this academic year (2020-2021). Highlighting the use of data to support and enhance existing practices may help staff and students alike to see the potential of embracing same and that

automating some information is simply streamlining what was already being done and enhancing its effectiveness.

There is a clear opportunity to exploit the various VLE platforms to enhance feedback and close the feedback loop. Both staff and students identified the use of polls and notifications to capture and address issues in a timely way, e.g., in relation to assessment approaches, deadlines, teaching and learning methods used.

Appendix 1

The specific poll questions were as follows:

Question 1 – Transparency (Poll 1) : Select all areas that you are aware of as Data Collection Points (Multiple Choice)

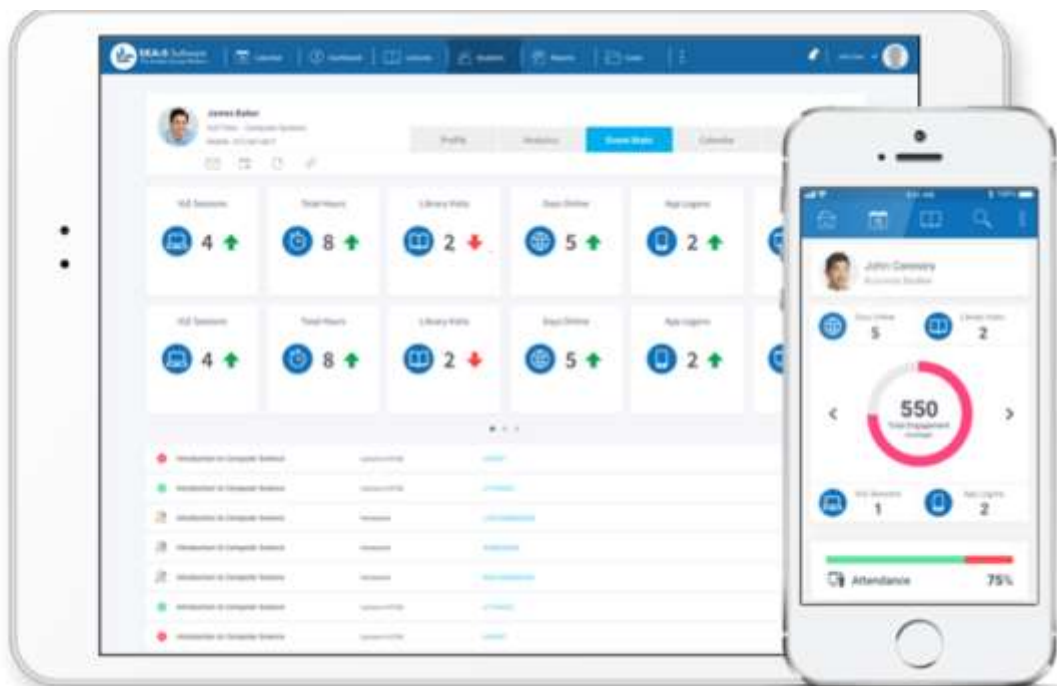
- Answer 1: Open Day
- Answer 2: CAO Application
- Answer 3: Registration
- Answer 4: VLE
- Answer 5: Library & Student Services
- Answer 6: Survey Responses
- Answer 7: Academic Performance & Progression
- Answer 8: Final Results & First Job

Question 4: Feedback to Students: (Poll 2)

1. What is your preferred way to receive feedback. Select all that apply from the list provided (Multiple Choice)

- Answer 1: In person (e.g. from your personal tutor)
- Answer 2: In writing (e.g. an email)
- Answer 3: Using Visualisations (e.g. a dashboard)

In relation to Answer 3 above, the following graphic was demonstrated as a type of visualisation that could be shared:



Q 5 – Intervention (Poll 3). Should the University normally have an obligation to act if you are identified as being at-risk of failing or underperforming in a module? (Single Choice)

- Answer 1: Yes
- Answer 2: No

2. Should the University normally give students the option to refuse the support? (Single Choice)

Answer 1: Yes

Answer 2: No

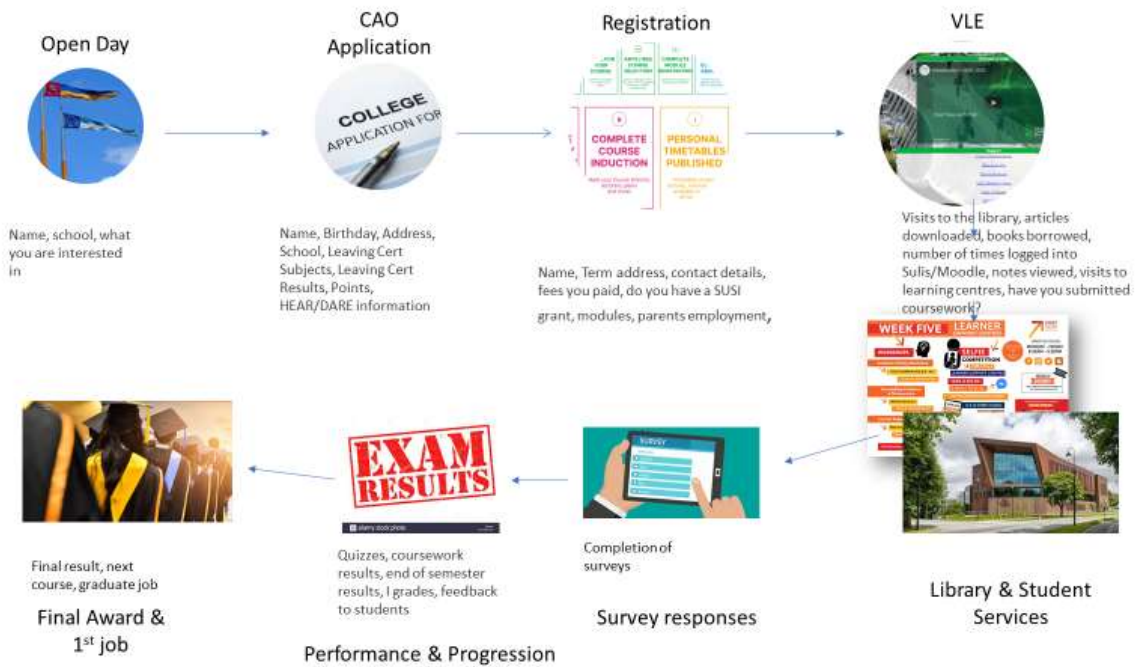
3. Should any specific kind of training be given to teaching staff to understand the analysis of your educational data and to accommodate the results into your personalised feedback? (Single Choice)

Answer 1: Yes

Answer 2: No

Appendix 2

The following slide was shared with participants in the Student Focus Groups capturing the various data collection points throughout the student journey from entry point to graduation. These collection points also formed the basis of the first poll.



ⁱ First Year Focus Group breakdown of attendees: 9 participants

Second Year Focus Group: 6 participants

Third Year Focus Group: 8 participants

Fourth Year Focus Group: 7 participants (including one who was a post-graduate student)

Mixed Focus Group A: 7 participants

Mixed Focus Group B: 3 participants

Postgraduate Taught/Research Focus Group: 7 participants