* Top of Form

Submission Format\*

* Case Study Presentation

Submission Theme\*

* Encouraging and Engaging the student voice

Title\*

* Engaging the student voice in the cloud:   
  Lessons learned from implementing a Student Voice Online Platform at Ulster University

A) Aim\*

The aim of this case study presentation is to share the lessons learned from implementing an innovative cloud based, online platform called “UNITU” at Ulster University. Providers of UNITU platform claim that it helps universities to collect and analyse student feedback in real time and deliver faster improvements to the student experience. We empirically verified this claim in survey-based pilot study and found some support. While involvement with the study was limited, some staff highlighted concerns around the use of anonymity by students in providing critical feedback. In this presentation, we make an empirically supported case for a cautious implementation of the UNITU and highlight the features that triggered anxiety and restlessness among staff. This case will be of interest to participants as the system is less well-known among UK universities and it offers insight into engaging student voice more responsively, in HE institutions.

B) Methodology\*

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Making use of a seven-week, UNITU implementation pilot period, at Ulster University, we conducted a survey study, using multiple, online questionnaires as tools to collect the views of students and course reps within nominated ​courses across 23 schools and departments for this pilot

* Procedure:

1. . Each School/Department with their Associate Dean for Education identified course(s) from each of the 23 schools, using convenience sampling strategy (n=23) – with a view to give access to the UNITU system to all key stakeholders associated with the courses.
2. Therefore, all students studying these 23 courses during the academic year 2020-21 (n=5200), and all course Reps (n=152) were identified as the sampling frame.
3. Using pre-test/post-test design, three different online questionnaires were designed (two for students and one for course-reps), using Qualtrics software:
   1. Students’ Questionnaire Pre-Unitu (S1) and ‘Post-Unitu’ (S2) surveys
   2. Course-Reps Questionnaire ‘Post-Unitu’ (S3) survey
4. Data Collection
   1. TIME 1: Questionnaires (S1) was sent to all students and course-reps, prior to the UNITU implementation (Pre-test)
   2. TIME 2: Nine weeks after the UNITU implementation, questionnaires (S2 and S3) were sent to students and course-reps respectively, who had participated in TIME 1.
5. Data collected via three tools in TIME 1 and TIME 2 were integrated and analysed using distributive statistics tests.
6. Response Rate:
   1. TIME 1 – 257 students, including course reps, completing S1
   2. TIME 2 – 40 students and 18 course-reps, completing S2 and S3 respectively
7. Selected Findings:

Between Time 1 and 2,

* 1. A 14% increase in students’ awareness on who their course rep is, and a 12% increase in using course reps to give feedback on their courses. (i.e., UNIT supports the role of course reps)
  2. A 12% increase in students satisfaction levels about the way students’ voice has been heard by the university.
  3. A 7% increase in students believing that they have the right opportunities to provide feedback
  4. 14% more students say that it was clear how students’ feedback on the course has been acted on (i.e., UNITU helps completing the feedback loop).
  5. Lessons learned: We found students’ perspectives indicate a positive impact of the UNITU system on encouraging and engaging with their voice. However, we have also noticed that
     1. According to the course-reps, there is limited evidence to suggest that the UNITU system had any significant positive impact in the way students’ voice has been encouraged or engaged.
     2. Importantly, during the pilot period, course directors’ engagement in UNITU implementation was minimal.. We had seen evidence of staff anxiety triggered by problems such as feedback-collection systems such as UNITU could promote a dividing practice - where Reps are positioned differently to other students, focus on problems but ignore new possibilities, reinforce a sense of ‘us and them’ between staff and students, and close down opportunities for discussions and continuous learning, as speculated by Young and Jerome (2020).

C) Contribution\*

* We present an empirical case study on the effectiveness of a new engagement platform, in enhancing the Ulster University’s ability to amplify students’ voice. Since this system is increasingly being considered as a potential solution to increase student engagement by UK universities, participants would find this case interesting and useful.
* The implications of this case study are not straightforward, except to proceed with caution, valuing the benefits but ensuring that rapid implementation of such systems does not ignore disengaged students and over-anxious academics.

D) Key takeaways\*

* To our knowledge, no published study is available yet on UNITU’s effectiveness and therefore, this evaluative case could potentially make a contribution to enhancing our knowledge of its impact on encouraging student voice, staff-student collaboration and student engagement in business schools and universities.
* We highlight the lessons we learned in implementing a online student voice platform and present a cautionary tale that could re-ignite conversations about students’ active disengagement, and anxieties and fears of academics on the issues of anonymous feedback.
* This study was designed and implemented by a unique group, that involves a student voice manager (the first author), a student union officer (the second author), and a business school student (the third author), who were mentored by a business school academic (the fourth author). This research-partnership is an example of how *Research-Informed Teaching* is practised in a business school, and of how *a collaborative co-production of knowledge* could be demonstrated in universities*.*

E) References

Young, H., & Jerome, L. (2020). Student voice in higher education: Opening the loop. *British Educational Research Journal*. Vol. 46, No. 3, June 2020, pp. 688–705