

Evaluating the impact of the Unitu student feedback platform

| | |
|---|----|
| Abstract | 1 |
| Introduction: What is Unitu | 1 |
| What is the value of Unitu? | 3 |
| Criticisms of Unitu | 3 |
| Unitu does not provide a unique benefit | 4 |
| Digital Fatigue | 4 |
| Summary | 5 |
| Unitu: a lesson from the data | 5 |
| Unleashing the potential of Unitu | 7 |
| Introduction | 7 |
| Policy Solution 1: Unify online spaces; establish Unitu as platform for ALL communication | 8 |
| Policy Solution 2: At every chance, Unitu should be established as the norm | 9 |
| Policy Solution 3: increasing department time on Unitu | 9 |
| A final note on these solutions | 10 |

Abstract

This paper discusses the platform Unitu, the impact of rolling it out within the LSE and how best the departments can manage this rollout. To investigate the LSE use of Unitu, I interviewed numerous stakeholders across the LSE and analysed Unitu usage data. I draw heavily from Unitu's year end summary presentation.

Introduction: What is Unitu

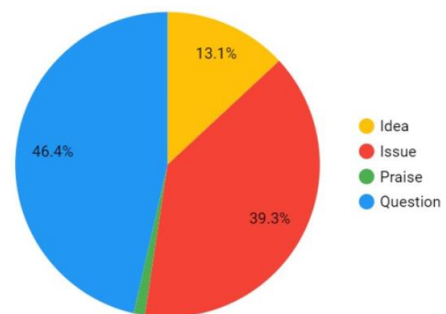
Unitu is a platform which allows students to ask questions directly to professors. Unitu can be thought of as similar to a Facebook page for each department, where students can post their questions, other students can upvote the questions, then further students can comment

with their own addendums; finally, hopefully, a member of the school administration can comment and answer the questions.

We can see the appeal of Unitu through looking at the highest viewed questions asked (in the table below). We notice instantly how mundane these questions are: Unitu is no revolutionary platform. The value of Unitu is simple and straightforward: a platform to bring together students and administrators, facilitating communication.

| | CHANGE TITLE | BOARD | Creation date | VIEWS | VOTES |
|---|---|------------|---------------|-------|-------|
| 1 | Grounds for appeals | LSE | Mar 21, 2021 | 974 | 108 |
| 2 | Turnitin similarity report | Management | Nov 16, 2020 | 392 | 53 |
| 3 | Exams, Timing and Proctoring Software | Law | Jan 11, 2021 | 334 | 41 |
| 4 | Exact format / timing of summer assessments | Law | Jan 10, 2021 | 310 | 40 |
| 5 | Law exam timetables | Law | Mar 16, 2021 | 374 | 36 |

And once a post is made by a student, what next? Well, this depends on the type of post. There are four categories (the distribution of which is shown below). Questions (“is the Economics department doing hoodies this year?”) usually find simple answers (“no”). Ideas and issues see their resolution too, and below we see some examples of resolution.



| RESOLUTION DATE | CHANGE TITLE | BOARD | NSS CATEGORY |
|-----------------|----------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|
| Feb 25, 2021 | Roof terraces in Centre Building | LSE (Uni board) | Organisation and management |
| Mar 5, 2021 | Zoom links on Moodle | LSE (Uni board) | Learning resources |
| Mar 18, 2021 | Increased capacity, fewer queues | LSE (Uni board) | Learning resources |

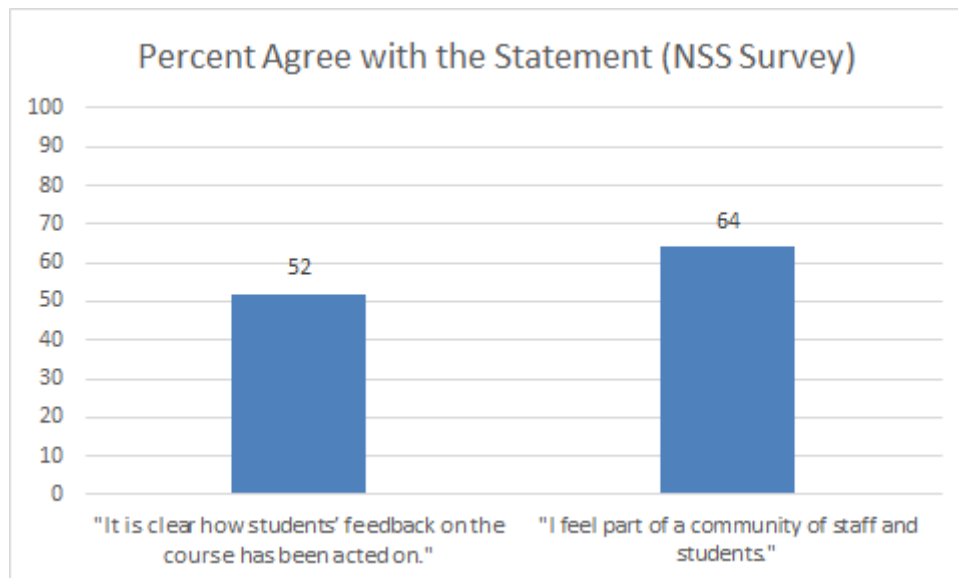
In this table above we see some examples of changes that have been made as a response to Unitu, again, we see that the success of the platform is not revolutionary. Rather, it allows those with boring problems (“when will the roof terraces be open?”) receive solutions (“we will open them now”). Without Unitu, the student wanting the roof terraces to be open would have no medium through which to voice that question. Unitu is not revolutionary, but the LSE’s endemic problems do not require revolutionary solutions. Rather, the solution is very simple: give people with problems a platform where they will be listened to.

I shall end this section on the value of Unitu with a few descriptive graphs. I do not include these with a message in mind, but rather with the hope that they will be of value.

What is the value of Unitu?

The value of Unitu is simple: those with questions are able to receive an answer . Others can leave their additions to a question, bystanders can vote which questions are more important. Once an answer is given, others can benefit by scrolling past and seeing the solution - this saves students bombarding administrators with the same questions over and over again. Unitu provides a platform for issues to be addressed. And, as I wrote earlier, the problems of LSE are no enigma. Rather, they can be solved simply by an administrator answering “yes” or “no”.

This appeal is extenuated when one considers the specific grievances that students hold at the LSE: in an environment where half of students feel neither a sense of community nor understand how their feedback is answered, then the importance of addressing feedback and answering specific questions becomes all the more important.



Criticisms of Unitu

Seeking to be balanced, in the next section of this paper I discuss the most commonly raised criticisms of Unitu. These criticisms are inspired through my interviews with the relevant stakeholders. Then, I address these criticisms.

1. Unitu does not provide a unique benefit

The first criticism against Unitu is that other platforms already in use provide the same benefit. This point is best articulated by an anonymous student:

“It's another website to keep track of this year, and on the whole, whatever we can do with unitu can probably be decently approximated by a well-designed moodle forum or two”

Finally, it's worth considering the framing of this criticism: it doesn't question that Unitu has benefits, but rather suggests that these benefits can be approximated elsewhere. This criticism works best as an argument for why not to adopt the platform in the first place. However, this then isn't relevant for most departments in LSE: they have Unitu already. It's likely true then that the benefits could be achieved by other platforms, but why bother when you're already using Unitu? I realise that this argument is very reductionist, painting the choice as a bland decision between two equally average options. I do this intentionally to draw out a key key point to raise early in this essay: it's not a question of whether or not to adopt Unitu, but rather we have already adopted it and the question is whether or not to put in the effort to harness the platform to its fullest potential. That fullest potential, I believe, can not be approximated by a well-designed moodle forum or two, and I will now show why this criticism does not hold.

The complete rollout of Unitu within a department allows for a standardised level of quality. Currently, lecturers have the scope to employ the software of their choice for Q&A and other student engagement - or they can choose not to use anything. This leads to a fractured response, where some decide not to engage with students, and the remaining professors decide upon a mix of platforms. A mix of platforms leads to far worse digital fatigue than if students just checked one. It is true that the benefits of Unitu can be reproduced by each lecturer, but it very often isn't, and the advantage of rolling Unitu out at the department level ensures a standardisation in quality, rather than leaving this to the discretion of individuals.

2. Digital Fatigue

Second, in interviews many mentioned “digital fatigue”. The harm of one more platform is exactly that: it is one more platform. LSE student hub has a timetable; moodle for courses; LSE for you is useful for exam related things. Unitu is another platform for students to check, and hence another burden on students. Over the pandemic, this argument increases in salience, as we find ourselves dependent on the digital for every form of communication - so the cost of yet one more is even greater.

My response to this is simple: when users know exactly what a platform is for, they do not feel fatigued for using it. No one feels fatigued by BBC weather, as we use it only when we want a specific problem fixed; when we need to know the weather. Unitu is another platform, but even its core proponents do not suggest we check it with the frequency that we would Twitter; if Unitu is seen as a specific solution to a specific problem, students will not feel fatigued through using it. Rather, they will open the app to answer a question, then

gladly receive a notification when they find it answered. This clean precision of Unitu, used for a specific purpose, and then put aside, is why I hope fatigue will be no issue.

If we were to find fatigue in the Unitu data, it would look like a large number of initial signups and then people would drop off as they become fatigued with the platform. Later in this paper I show that the opposite is true, once people have signed up to the platform they use it consistently. We see no evidence of fatigue in the data.

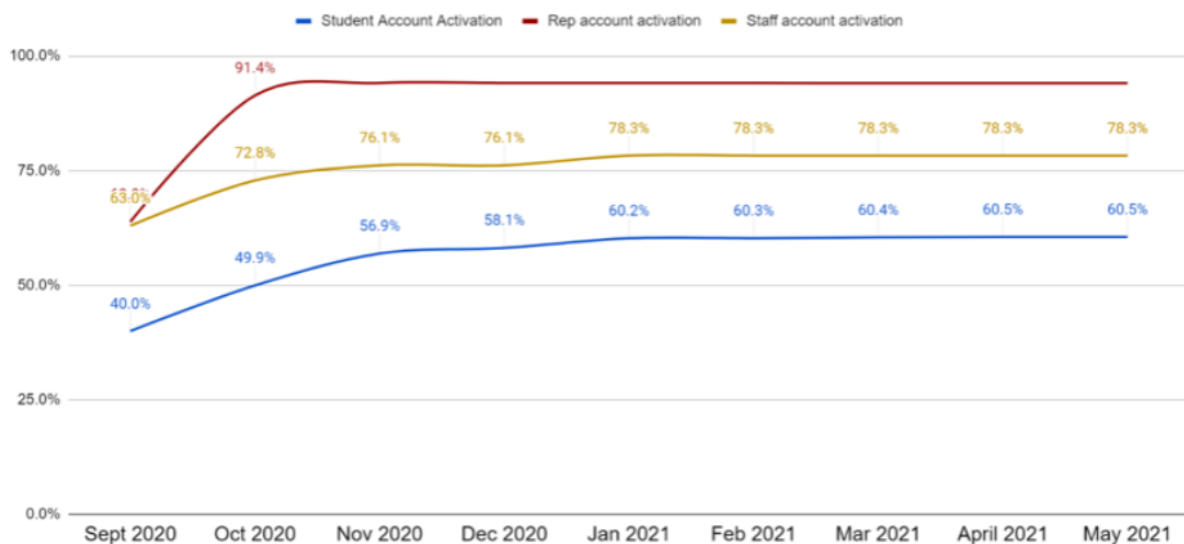
Summary

As I began, Unitu is no panacea. In fact, it is a tool to fix a problem: a platform upon which students can ask questions. But like all tools, being in possession of Unitu is not sufficient for the problems of a department to vanish. A tool is only valuable when applied to problems; and Unitu has to be used in earnest for the benefits to be felt. I sympathise with the criticisms of Unitu, and indeed I believe that they are valid. That being said, I believe that, if the platform was fully embraced then this would override the concerns of detractors, and instead create overriding benefits. In the rest of this paper I hope to discuss the steps that departments can take to increase the use of Unitu, and hence allow the benefits to blossom.

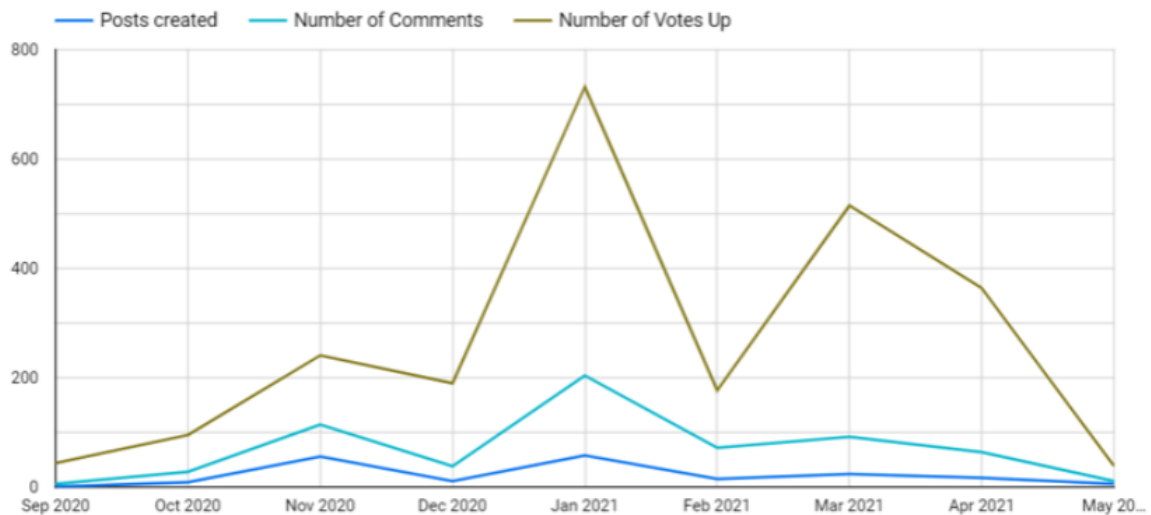
Unitu: a lesson from the data

I believe that there is one key finding from the Unitu data, and it's worth a specific section of this paper highlighting and explaining that finding: once people sign up they use the platform pretty frequently.

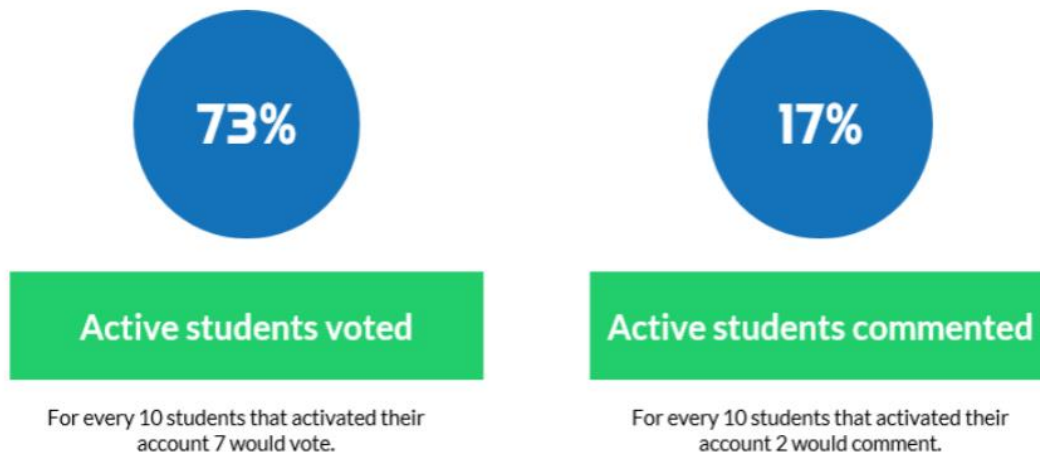
First, we need to understand what sign ups to Unitu look like. There's an initially high rate, then it plateaus as no new members join.



The next step is what is interesting: despite the fact that almost all the users joined in the first two months, comments and engagement are equally distributed across the academic term. Note here that we do not observe fatigue; we do not observe a sharp dropoff in the use of the platform over the first couple of weeks. Instead, we see consistent usage all year long.



Additionally, Unitu can provide us with specific accounts level data about the level of engagement from users: once people activated an account, most engaged with posts through voting. I do note another problem here; less than one in five commented directly¹.



This principle - that once students access Unitu, they use it - is relevant for two reasons.

First, it allows us to know the role of policies. It's not the case that departments need to invest all their effort in encouraging people to use Unitu; once they sign up, students mostly engage of their own volition. This makes sense; we see that students engage when they have a specific question they want answered, and they're likely to use Unitu to ask that

¹ Do we regard this as a problem? I believe that this depends on why low commenting occurs; if people don't comment because they have no problems to raise (a best-case scenario for proponents of Unitu), then there's nothing to worry about. However, if it is the case that people don't raise comments on the platform simply because they don't think to, then that's a problem that the departments should address. I raise this in more detail in the policy section of the paper.

question no matter when in the academic year they find themselves wondering it. This highlights that departments need to encourage people to sign up to Unitu, and the policy orientated section of this paper will suggest solutions to that problem.

Second, this finding is key for it allows us to understand the underlying problem. When confronted with low levels of student engagement under the status quo (across the board, not just on Unitu) one does wonder why. This data sheds some light: it's not that students are fatigued, and don't want to engage; rather, it's that they lack the mechanism to engage currently. Once they are given access to Unitu, they now have a way to contact administrators and they use it to ask questions as and when these problems come up. Again, this finding is key since it highlights that a lack of engagement currently does not occur since students do not want engagement; but rather the lack of engagement occurs since students do not have a mechanism with which to interact with the department.

Unleashing the potential of Unitu

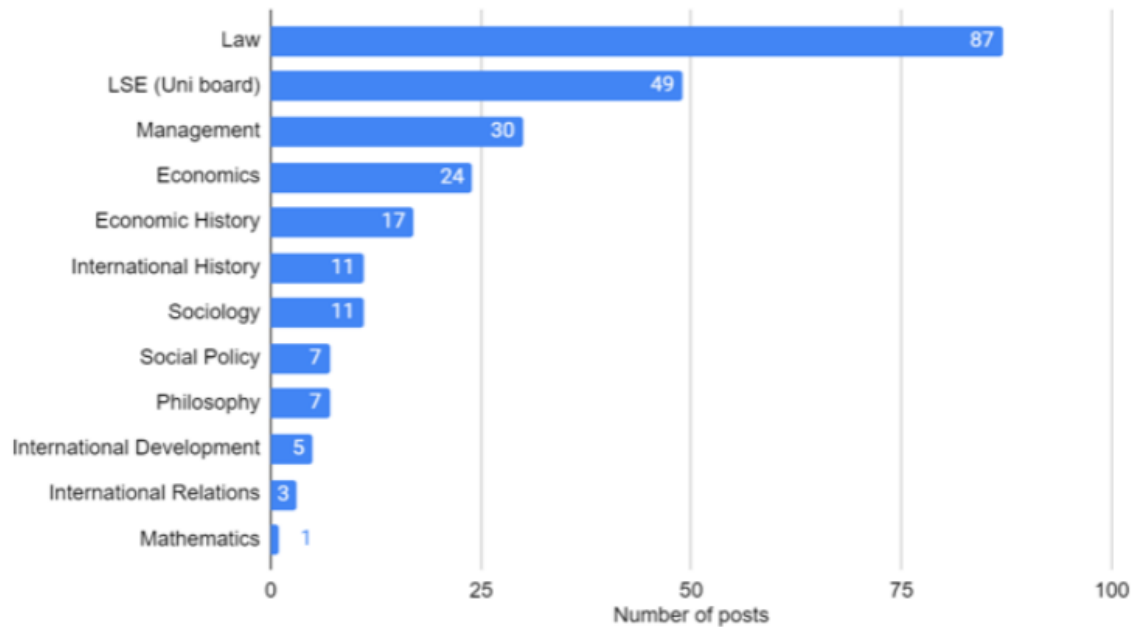
Introduction

This final section of the proposal deals with the best policies the department can adopt for unleashing the potential of Unitu. I begin this section with three observations.

First, the level of signups and the level of posts varies massively between departments (as shown below). A department earnest in their desire to increase the engagement with Unitu should begin by discussing with other departments about what did and did not work. I interviewed members of staff from many departments hoping to provide scalable lessons, but I believe that there are still many insights which went untapped.

| BOARDS | | STUDENTS | | BOARDS | | STUDENTS | |
|---------------------------|--|----------|--|---------------|--|----------|--|
| Economic History | | 61% | | Management | | 62% | |
| Economics | | 56% | | Mathematics | | 45% | |
| International Development | | 51% | | Philosophy | | 54% | |
| International History | | 60% | | Social Policy | | 63% | |
| International Relations | | 70% | | Sociology | | 65% | |
| Law | | 70% | | | | | |

Note, the below graph does not give percentages.



Second, if a department has decided to adopt Unitu, it might as well do it properly. The service half-implemented is the worst of both worlds; on a platform students only occasionally use, response speeds are low and fatigue will set in. If the reader comes out of this paper and decides to stop all usage of Unitu in their department, while the author may not agree, he would at least understand. However, if the reader comes out of this paper and decides to embark on a lukewarm adoption of Unitu, then the author would regard this as a problem. All issues with Unitu can be countered by a wholehearted adoption of Unitu.

Now, onto the policy solutions. There are two metrics by which I believe that success should be judged: first, does a policy lead to more people signing up to the platform; second, does a policy lead to more people using the platform once signed up².

Policy Solution 1: Unify online spaces; establish Unitu as platform for ALL communication

Currently, departments use many different software for different things: communication with offer holders is performed over email, where their questions are answered in forums or occasionally zoom sessions; academic staff use Moodle, Canva or email for questions and answers; departments perform straw polls about how students are doing, using informal Google sheets or asking people to email back. In each of these contexts actors within the department are asking students to engage, but as each administrator pulls the student in a different direction the student is less likely to engage with any given direction. There is a battle for the attention of the student, and as this attention is dragged in multiple different

² There are two reasons why someone may leave a comment on Unitu; either asks a question which would have been asked via a different medium (be it email or moodle), or a question that previously would have gone unanswered. Both are useful: Unitu is most effective when it can benefit from network effects, and moving people to Unitu means others are then more likely to use it.

directions attention and engagement dissipates.

The proposed solution here is simple: establish Unitu as the platform for all communication. In any instance where a member of the department wants to either field questions or ask for feedback from a student, they should use Unitu. This hits both of our targets. Now, more students are inclined to sign up as they know this is the only way they can voice complaints or engage with professors. Second, it increases the number of people likely to comment. If a student goes to Unitu to give half-term feedback to a professor, they are then more likely to scroll through the platform and leave a comment about some other matter. Once a comment is received, this will notify others to vote on the comment. Commenting benefits from large snowball effects, and the more people who initially engage the more likely the initial comments will generate momentum and push more onto the platform.

Policy Solution 2: At every chance, Unitu should be established as the norm

Here, we take an idea from the private sector: selling a product with a consistent message, at every chance available. When I am on Amazon, every chance Amazon has it will attempt to sell me Amazon Prime: it will use a consistent message and consistently highlight the same benefits. This ensures I know the most about the product, and I know the specific and concise benefits. There are no mixed messages.

The LSE should adopt both elements of this when 'selling' Unitu. First, the messaging around Unitu should be made consistent. When different people in the department are asked "what is Unitu?" they should give the same answer ("it's where you go to get questions answered"); if members of the department are confused, how would you expect students to know what it is used for³? Second, Unitu should be 'sold' at every stage in the process. Departments engage with students at many times: as offer holders, during welcome week, during weekly newsletters, as people sign up to moodle forums, professors looking for feedback. In each of these instances, Unitu should appear. It should be mentioned in each and every one, at the very minimum, a little line at the bottom saying "if you have any questions, don't hesitate to reach out at Unitu".

Policy Solution 3: increasing department time on Unitu

Below is the data on staff engagement in on Unitu, and below that is the rep engagement time on Unitu:

Staff:

³ I would also recommend the departments discuss what their consistent message is to be. One administrator made the following comments, and it strikes me that they could be solved by a consistent message: "A key issue is fragmented responsibility. Some questions are academic ... and are very clearly in the remit of the ... Department. And other questions are more at the School level and not addressed by us e.g. why don't more buildings open during lockdown. Students don't often distinguish between School issues and Department issues and so direct all problems to the same place."

| AVG TIME TO FIRST VIEW | AVG TIME TO FIRST REPLY | AVG TIME TO RESOLUTION | % POSTS WITH REPLY |
|------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| 2.07 Days | 8.58 Days | 16.44 Days | 62% |

Reps:

| POSTS COMMENTED ON | POSTS CLOSED BY REPS | AVERAGE TIME TO RESPOND | AVERAGE TIME TO ESCALATE |
|--------------------|----------------------|-------------------------|--------------------------|
| 25% | 15% | 1 day | 8 days |

We note here that these engagement numbers are low. Engagement from staff and reps is a chicken-and-egg problem; if engagement on the site is low, less comments will be posted, so staff will spend less time on the site so there will be a longer period of time before comments get answered, so people will spend less time on the site.

If the departments begin to roll out Unitu, then they should also make sure that they do not nip the growth of Unitu in the bud. Departments need to ensure that their monitoring of Unitu increases commensurate with the user base on Unitu, as otherwise there will just be a large body of questions going unanswered.

A final note on these solutions

It is worth noting what these proposed solutions are, and what they are not. Both of these solutions require a subtle change in emphasis in the status quo, neither of them involve any revolutionary work, nor do they require everyone in the department to suddenly start doing their jobs differently, rather they require a focused streamline approach. The challenge here is institutional resistance, to adopt a new platform across the board and then develop a consistent message. This involves doing something new, and usually people don't like doing something new.

What is this solution not? Let's discuss some of the most successful things departments I have interviewed have enrolled upon, one administrator detailed that "I've plugged it numerous times and had induction sessions with students on how to use it". Now, I think departments running induction sessions is excellent, and should probably be done. However, I have kept my policy solutions to the two above since I believe these low-hanging fruit need to be taken before departments begin to deal with higher order concerns: first, make sure everyone knows what Unitu is; after this, you can afford to deal with the handful of 20 year olds who aren't tech-savvy enough to use it.