Student Voice at the LSE: Understanding the Impact of the Unitu Feedback Platform

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Introduction

Unitu is a platform that allows students to post questions, ideas, or feedback on their department's forum or the university-wide one. They can do so anonymously or not, and they can choose to comment or give 'thumbs up' or' thumbs down' to a post. It is also a recent acquisition that is likely part of the LSE's strategy to improve student satisfaction (and thereby student voice) after a low point in 2018. Although this has shown positive results [1], it remains unclear to what extent each of the strategies has affected the improvement. Making this clear will allow the LSE to manage resources more efficiently and understanding Unitu's contribution is one step in this direction. Thus, my research question is: How does Unitu impact student voice at the LSE?

Intuitively, such a platform can be useful, especially in a pandemic, when students' ability to stay connected with staff or with their peers is impaired. There is some evidence that increased use of technology in higher education can increase opportunity for student expression [2]. Its anonymity function may also encourage more honest feedback [3], though, it could equally result in less desirable behaviour. Moreover, Unitu provides a few case studies suggesting it has improved students' experiences across multiple universities. Notably, one pilot study concluded that Unitu had *potential* to better student-staff communication [4]. My project aims to establish if this potential has been fulfilled at the LSE.

Methodology and Data

The initial design of the project encompassed both quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative aspect would have implied analysing the relationship between using Unitu and high satisfaction on student voice among departments. However, some issues with the data ruled this step out. Using semi-structured interview data (twelve interviews with students, eight of which were student representatives) was envisioned as a way to bring to light more specific issues that quantitative analysis would not, while serving to triangulate the previous findings. Although triangulation is not possible, the discourse analysis of interviews can stand on its own. It indicates that Unitu is particularly helpful due to its anonymity function, but that it is better used in tandem with other feedback tools. This does not necessarily suggest that it has improved student-staff communication, but it appears to have improved the students' experience of expressing their voice. Nonetheless, smaller departments do not seem to benefit from it as much as larger ones.

The Risks of Speaking Out

Most students' discourse highlights concern about the consequences of giving feedback or speaking out in general. In some cases, they reveal this implicitly, by stressing the existence or importance of the Unitu function that allows one to post anonymously. This feature makes it easier to avoid negative consequences. Rifah describes a situation in which students would go out of their way to hide their identity while giving feedback: "Also, the opportunity to do things completely anonymously [on Unitu], I think, is super important and certainly encourages people to do stuff more. When we had the SSLC [Student Staff Liaison Committee], we would have people making fake email addresses - just burner email addresses - just to send anonymous feedback [...]". Others talk about such risks explicitly, also tying the issue with said function at times. Even though Beatrice is a student representative (rep) and likely has a closer relationship to staff than other students, she is still reluctant to speak her mind. She says: "I know even I post my things anonymously because I don't want... I don't want to be divisive. And I feel safer about it. It's like all about power dynamics. Right? When you try to speak truth to power, you're probably gonna have some negative consequence come out of that [...]". This is consistent with previous findings [3]. That said, only few brought up the possible disadvantages of anonymity, despite issues with anonymous users engaging aggressively at the time. I address this issue in the *Recommendations* section.

Platform Inadequacy

Although, as specified before, technology can provide new ways to improve student voice [2], Unitu is but one of the tools enabling universities to do this. A majority of students who had engaged with the platform identify some comparative disadvantages of using Unitu. When the discussion veers to feedback without the question being specifically about Unitu, they tend to list other means of communication, such a WhatsApp. Some students, including reps, have described the platform as 'too formal', more impersonal or inconvenient than speaking directly to another student. For instance, Daria, who is also a rep, is of this opinion: "I just feel like the barrier of going onto Unitu as opposed to just telling your rep first-hand is kind of an issue, because if I just [inaudible] someone... 'Oh no, you've got to put it on this website', they might not do it". To an extent, this comes in conflict with the previous finding that students have appreciation for Unitu's anonymity option - something that would be harder to achieve on WhatsApp or through other means. This is likely an indication that Unitu alone would not fulfill all of students' feedback preferences, but that it is still useful alongside other options.

Lack of Engagement

A majority who used Unitu indicate that there is a lack of engagement with the platform, though not necessarily on the university-wide forum. They do so either directly or by stating that there were not many issues being raised in their department. Some assume students turn off their Unitu email notifications or imply that the platform is easy to avoid. Beatrice thinks: "Maybe if [Unitu] was more integrated into the existing online systems like Moodle or something like that... You can't go through LSE and avoid Moodle. That is the core of it, I think, so if those were synced up more maybe that would produce more interaction with it". Connor expresses a counter-intuitive opinion, but his department is among the largest using the platform: "normally in Michaelmas term I almost never got any responses, or you know just... There weren't any threads [on] the school-wide Unitu, whereas on my department's

Unitu - it's always like one every other day, at least, or sometimes more".

Recommendations

- Based on the finding that smaller departments engage less with Unitu, the LSE should focus resources on larger departments and a university-wide forum.
- Since the anonymity option can be helpful for all students, it should be made available for all departments, regardless of their size. For smaller departments that do not necessarily require Unitu, the university could host its own webpage on which logged in users have the possibility to express themselves anonymously.
- When using such a service, users who attempt to upload posts/comments containing inappropriate words should be timed out for a period of 24 hours. This should be implemented if the LSE decides to create its own feedback page. Unitu may also be able to create such a feature. This will require less moderation from staff and prevent students from taking advantage of their anonymity. The time out would serve to discourage users from acting out impulsively.
- Perform further quantitative research to improve generalisability.

References

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[3]   U. Gneezy, C. Gravert, S. Saccardo, and F. Tausch, "A must lie situation-avoiding giving negative feedback," *Games and Economic Behavior*, vol. 102, pp. 445–454, 2017.

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