Kirsty Appleton-Bailey
Associate Innovation Scholar 2025/26

Exploring End of Module Survey:

Student survey response rates and the feedback loop



Student survey response rates and the feedback loop

A LEED Associate Innovation Scholarship project exploring:

What practices module leaders at Manchester Metropolitan University implement on modules to achieve positive response rates to Student Surveys.

How the implementation of the 'feedback loop', or closing the 'feedback loop' influence student satisfaction and sense of 'student voice' on a module.

Kirsty Appleton-Bailey

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Collage images throughout, created by participants of focus groups at The Union, Manchester Metropolitan University and conference session at London Southbank University.

Introduction to project

This research aims to investigate the processes, interventions and ideas behind strong student feedback activity and achievement of good survey response rates. As with Lisa Collin's research on the reverse of this zine, this has been informed by the response from the End of Module survey, and in my case, an aim to improve the response rate of student participants in this and other surveys.

At the time of this research Manchester Metropolitan's response rates to the End of Module Survey were low, with 15.8% completion across the institution in 2024/25. I proposed that increased response rates would allow for a better understanding of student opinion regarding their modules, and the wider University, and could lead to an increase in student satisfaction and sense of belonging. The research project proposal, developed as part of my LEED Associate Innovation Scholarship, aligned with the University's ambition on 'the Road to 2030' to be a leading institution in student experience and the ambition that we make our university a 'great place to study'[1], along with aligning to the institutional goal to achieve at least a 50% response rate to the End of Module Survey.

The following research captures academic staff and student representatives' thoughts and feeling about how and why students give feedback, how to better engage students and how to better use their feedback. Through the analysis of participant comments eight thematic areas emerged, informing the structure of this research output. Quotes from both groups are provided throughout, alongside images created by focus group and workshop participants, responding to the same subject.

Methodology

Questionnaire: open to module leaders at Manchester Metropolitan whose modules in 2024/25 achieved;

80% or higher Overall Satisfaction, 80% or higher Student Voice Agree, 40% or higher student response rate, 10 or more student responses, a year-on-year change in Overall Satisfaction between -5% and 100%, and a year-on-year change in response rate between -5% and 100%.

This included 93 module leaders across 100 modules. 34 module leaders responded to the survey, totalling a response rate of 36.6%. Module leaders submitted a total of 89 comments across four free text questions. 32 module leaders completed five multiple choice (Likert scale) questions rating the impact of activity on different areas of the module/student experience.

Focus groups: open to members of staff working at Manchester Metropolitan University's Students' Union (The Union), including but not limited to those working in a student voice focussed role. Eight members of staff were initially directly invited to take part, with a further staff member contacted following a suggestion. Initial email invitations welcomed staff members to share the opportunity more broadly in their teams/organisation.

Two one-hour focus groups were conducted in March 2025 with five staff members from The Union, Manchester Metropolitan University. Focus group participants completed a short ten-minute collage activity and a 40-minute group discussion.

Comments from both methods were analysed using Bree and Gallagher's method[2] to thematically analyse qualitative data. Comments were identified and categorised into the following eight themes, with five key take-aways for each theme.

Meaningful

How meaning was created and supported through feedback; considering overwhelm, incentives and anonymity.

Whether students and staff felt that feedback and/or the subsequent changes made were meaningful.

The idea of meaning was predominant in both academic staff and student representatives' comments as an indicator of whether feedback was valued or worth engaging with.

Academic staff described how feedback was meaningful to them and built confidence when students highlighted changes they'd made or delivery they were proud of. Where criticism was given in feedback, they found that this could be meaningful if it was constructive. They noted that social activities helped to create meaning for students.

Academic staff also reported that student feedback could lack meaning by being too superficial or too varied to lead to any significant change. Some academic staff felt that student feedback wasn't as meaningful as the decisions staff could make themselves as subject experts.

Student representatives described how meaning could be built for students through connection to their goals, linking student voice to career aspirations and academic success. They believed that this could help students to see the value of feedback for themselves and their peers.

The groups discussed how overwhelm and frequency of voice activity could decrease meaning for students, therefore limiting information shared could allow more choice to engage meaningfully. Meaningful engagement was also discussed in relation to incentivisation. Some student representatives felt that

incentives could remove meaning from feedback activity, believing impact and meaning to be gained through intrinsic motivation. Others felt that incentivisation was important in order to compensate students for their effort and time.

Student representatives agreed that meaning could be supported through creating safety for students around student voice, ensuring anonymity to promote meaningful and honest feedback.

Student representatives reported that feedback could be more meaningful when gained from a specific group or intersection of students, often the least engaged students being those that could share the most meaningful insight. They emphasised that students shouldn't be homogenised or made assumptions of.

Community and collaboration

How students' space, safety and communications with staff shaped student voice activity.

How collaboration and social activities shaped and formed student response and engagement with surveys.

Academic staff shared that psychological safety was vital to ensuring students had the confidence to ask and answer questions, both in the classroom and in student voice activity. Academic staff described that community building and social activity within a cohort, and with the communities that students might study or work with, helped students to recognised shared feelings. This connection added to students' sense of safety in voicing their feelings, and acknowledging diversity among students, staff and guests helped students to share personal perspectives.

Academic staff noted that ensuring consistent community activity, such as town hall meetings or lunchtime catch-ups supported engagement with student voice activity. However, staff also recognised that this was more difficult to sustain in large cohorts or in online teaching. 'Getting to know' students was seen as key to supporting voice, but this was hard to achieve in some teaching settings.

"The reading club has helped to develop cohort identity and build confidence in communicating with each other, me and with reading."

Student representatives also recognised the impact of space on students' sense of community and voice. They noted that small groups were easier to foster voice activity, but that this could be achieved in different settings such as seminars, sports teams and student councils. Student representatives highlighted that online communities could be utilised to support student voice and feedback activity, through engagement on social media, newsletters and dedicated feedback platforms.

The importance of Student Officers' role was noted in the discussions with the student representatives, they reported that the role bridged the gap between students, the students' union and the university. The Officer role was seen to students as relatable and supportive, it supported students' sense of psychological safety and exemplified how staff buy-in and university engagement could be amplified to support student voice.



Constructive/Criticism

How constructive feedback and/or constructive criticism were viewed by staff and students.

How students' perceptions of positive or negative feedback shaped student voice and staff buy-in.

Academic staff discussed the value of asking students for both positive and negative feedback and explained the values of both to their students. Where constructive criticism was received but couldn't be acted on, staff explained why. Staff reported how they shared students' feedback with the following year's cohort, this had helped the next class to see what sort of feedback had been given and how.

"I ask the students for constructive criticism, explaining how this helps me to improve the content for the next cohort and how they have benefited from previous feedback".

"Reinforcing it is anonymous. Asking for honest feedback. Showing the students last year's feedback and how it had changed the module this year".

Academic staff emphasised the importance of passing feedback on to other teams and services to ensure constructive improvements could be made, where staff couldn't fix things themselves. The student representatives similarly discussed the need for feedback to be shared broadly across the university.

Student representatives also discussed the value of both positive and negative feedback and ensuring students were aware of the importance of sharing both, they discussed how students



could use feedback and problem solving as a tool for their success, it was important to them that students had the option to be involved in this.

Student representatives spoke at length about the importance of staff-buy in and the visibility of the importance of student voice to students, at a university-level. Part of ensuring this was by ensuring that staff could use the feedback given to them and that they could see the benefits of receiving the feedback. The student representatives discussed how prior perceptions of student voice could impact how staff and students engaged with voice activity, they discussed the influence this might have on how academic staff respond to students' feedback and how this might drive students' desire for change.

Consistency and disruption

The importance of consistent communication around student feedback, consistency in university processes and consistency of response to student voice.

How consistency, inconsistency and disruption impacted student and staff experience of modules, student voice and survey response.

Academic staff reported on the importance of consistency and communication to ensure positive experiences for staff and students, supporting strong student voice activity. Some staff discussed the perceived necessity for change and weighing up the student feedback versus possible impact to the module, assessing where changes shouldn't be made and where good practice should be continued. Academic staff described the value students see in continuing the things that work, especially where

changes that have or haven't been made are communicated to students.

“The student feedback is variable, and changeable from cohort-to-cohort. You have to pick carefully what you change, or how you deliver.”

In comparison to academic staff predominantly discussing consistency and change in module delivery, student representatives mainly discussed consistency around surveys and student voice activities and how these should be delivered. Student representatives emphasised the importance of consistent communication with students regarding student feedback, including consistency around timings and how feedback would be responded to. Some student representatives felt that methods of communication should also be consistent, with standardisation across departments to avoid different experiences for students. Similarly, some representatives felt that the way student feedback was responded to should be standardised to provide consistency.

Student representatives discussed the idea of momentum and building student engagement through consistency. Acknowledging low survey response rates and areas of low on-campus attendance, the representatives discussed that momentum could be built through continued conversation. They described that this might be through continued conversation around student voice, or more generally around assignment related feedback, which could be delivered through teaching.

“I think it's really important the feedback loop to be consistent, not necessarily weekly, but so that students know when it's going to come or at least you told them the date its happening.”

Response

How staff responded to students' feedback in the End of Module Survey, reflecting on module change and survey engagement.

What a university or academic should share and what students should be aware of. The importance of timing, space and unpopular opinions.

Academic staff commented on the importance of honest response to students in relation to student voice, ensuring that students' expectations were managed when there was something that couldn't be done, whilst maintaining the value of feedback. The value students saw in voice activity, particularly in surveys, could be impacted by staff views on these, it was noted that academic staff felt central University surveys impacted engagement with their own feedback mechanisms.

Academic staff reported that use of survey terminology and survey literacy had impacted students' responses or language in surveys and in assessment. Staff and student representatives drew connections between student voice activity, assessment feedback and learning outcomes. Passion about research and student involvement in research activity may also influence students' passion to be involved in surveys and student feedback collection.

"I am passionate about my subject and try to pass that on, including showing the students examples of my own (very current) research and involving them in class activities where they discuss this."

Student representatives discussed the University's duty to update students on what changes had been or would be made as a result



of their feedback, even if the activity hadn't been completed yet. This was highlighted as important for ensuring students were aware that what they may see as the 'norm' wasn't always that way, that other students' feedback had influenced positive changes that may have improved their experiences.

The student representatives discussed the subject of 'unpopular opinions' and raised that the University and academic staff should be prepared to make changes that might go against what they want. They suggested that if a change can't or won't be made, don't ask students to provide feedback on it.

Timings of student voice activity was also noted by the student representatives as impacting ability to respond, they discussed that surveys earlier in the semester may be better to make changes quickly, but that students might be too busy to respond. The student representatives agreed that collecting 'real time' feedback in lectures, committees and clubs was a good way to

Process

How specific processes impacted student survey response and module experience for staff and students.

How different processes were used to collect data and how student voice was impacted by these.

Academic staff described the processes they had used to support student voice activity and strong survey response rates. These included feed-forward methods to share student feedback with colleagues in order to support change. One member of staff noted that by intervening in module improvements and change, this demonstrated a good leadership approach to their students and colleagues. Academic staff had also used resources to engage

students with feedback mechanisms, such as by sharing details of the End of Module Survey in-class and using QR codes, both of which had supported students' engagement.

Academic staff also noted where issues had arose as part of central processes, such as with the End of Module Survey. They noted that timing of the survey made it difficult to make changes in -module or in-semester, and that focus on the End of Module Survey may have negatively impacted engagement with their other feedback processes.

Student representatives discussed the variety of processes available to support student feedback and the merits of using online feedback collection for accessibility, but the engagement that could come from in-person feedback opportunities. The representatives spoke about the opportunities for live feedback response and 24/7 access to student voice mechanisms through online platforms, it was discussed how processes like this could be implemented and whether they work.

Student representatives also discussed how incentivisation and gamification could work to improve student engagement, however disagreed on whether incentivisation could appear transactional and deter students. Most representatives agreed that seeking feedback in-person was a more person-centred approach, online feedback was seen as more transactional, but the data gathered was easier to use in decision making.

In the discussion of processes, it was noted that the University holds useful data and that this should be used where possible to inform decision making, rather than relying on new surveys.



Informed

How student survey response informed change on modules.

How student feedback informs university processes and how the university tells students about their contributions.

Comments from academic staff categorised as 'Informed' covered where survey response had informed change, but where change had not necessarily been communicated with students. Academic staff detailed the ways in which student response to the End of Module Survey had informed change on their modules and led to improved student satisfaction. Staff discussed how survey response could inform decision making across modules when good practice was shared.

Student representatives predominantly discussed how and where student voice informed decision making, with emphasis on ensuring that changes were communicated with students. It was important to the student representatives that students understood the contributions and impact they could have through sharing feedback, it was necessary to support this through informing students on where their feedback would go and what changes had been made from it.

Student representatives also discussed the importance of different types of feedback to inform change, noting that quantitative data was seen as a more robust form of feedback, but that word-of-mouth could be equally important. They questioned whether qualitative data needed to be 'proved' by quantitative data to inform decision making. In relation to this, they also discussed the use of pre-existing data to inform decision making and answer questions, rather than creating more surveys.

The student representatives felt that it was vital that all university services be informed on student feedback and for all to be involved in collecting and sharing feedback. They discussed visibility of information across campus, such as through banners.

Impact

What is impactful for different groups of students, and how students can have impact?

Where did academic staff see impact on their module?

The theme of 'Impact' became apparent in discussion with student representatives but was not a theme seen in comments from academic staff. Academic staff however reported on the impact they had seen on their modules as a result of feedback received from students in the survey's Likert scale question.

The student representatives discussed how university feedback processes must work for and with students who are the least engaged in order to make the most impact, noting the difficulty in engaging with students who were not typically engaging with co-curricular or extra-curricular processes due to the nature of their study or their external commitments. Similarly, the student representatives raised that the services and teams within the university who may see in-curriculum student feedback least, for example residential teams, estates and facilities, may be those that can make the most impact on students' experiences. It was therefore important that university shares feedback it receives in-curriculum across teams.

The student representatives discussed the importance of student feedback in the University and The Union's work and emphasised how this must be taken seriously, and be seen as being taken seriously to students. The representatives reported on the areas where they have seen the impact of student voice and student experience in the student journey, such as Graduate Outcomes, and differential outcomes and awarding gaps.

The student representatives also discussed the external impact of student voice at length, noting the importance of strong voice activity for public perception and external rankings and describing

how this could impact the experience of prospective and future students. This depending on how the university is perceived and the experience that students might receive in the future.

Academic staff felt that the areas most impacted as a result of activity or changes made following End of Module Survey response were Teaching and Student Satisfaction, with 77.4% who responded finding this Very impactful or Impactful. The area least impacted by activity was Resources, where 12.9% responded finding this Very unimpactful or Unimpactful. These results align with what student representatives discussed regarding in-curriculum feedback and its impact on other university areas. It highlights that even where some impact can be seen from students' feedback and staff engagement to work with this, full impact cannot be seen without full institutional engagement with, and sharing of, feedback.

Conclusion

This research presents analysis on what methods and processes academic staff use on modules to achieve positive response rates to student surveys, highlighting through the thematic areas recurring methods, intentional and unintentional, that support student engagement.

Key takeaways from this research can be seen in each theme. For example, the importance of community and belonging to promote psychological safety and improve students' engagement with voice activity can be seen in 'Meaningful', 'Community' and 'Constructive/Criticism'. The importance of a consistent process that promotes student and staff trust and understanding can be seen in the themes of 'Response', 'Process' and 'Consistency and Disruption'.

These reoccurring themes can also be seen in student

representatives' responses on the implementation of the 'feedback loop' and its influence on student satisfaction and sense of 'student voice' on a module. The themes that emerged from their discussion also centred on the importance of 'Process', with emphasis on the use of information and the impact on many different areas of the university and student life, under 'Informed' and 'Impact'.

This research has provided me with a basis to further inform activity in my work and share good practice examples from academic staff and student representatives. It is my aim that this work can inform university processes going forward, highlighting areas of focus under these thematic areas to ensure methods to improve response rates and the feedback loop can be informed by reflections from staff and students .

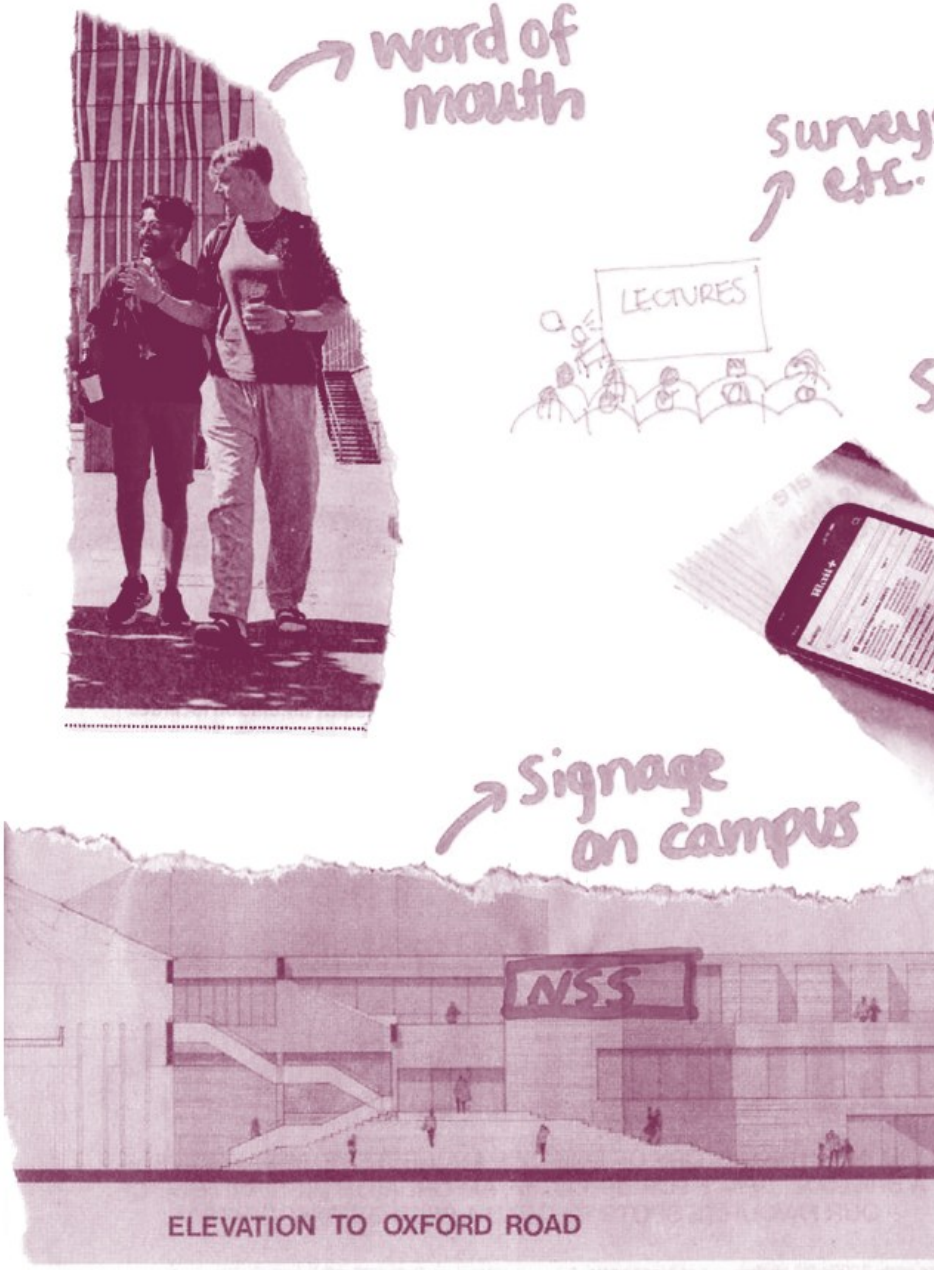
Message of thanks

Thank you to colleagues from throughout Manchester Metropolitan University, The Union, and further afield who have supported this research by providing their time and invaluable insight into their experiences of student voice and feedback. Thank you to my team within Curriculum Services who have supported this scholarship activity, and thank you to the Innovation Scholarship community for providing this opportunity, your training, mentorship and expertise have been amazing.

References

[1]Manchester Metropolitan University (2023) Education Strategy. Available at: https://www.mmu.ac.uk/about-us/strategy.

[2] Bree, R.T., Gallagher, G. (2016) 'Using Microsoft Excel to code and thematically analyse qualitative data: a simple, cost-effective approach.', The All Ireland Journal of Higher Education (AISHE-J), 8(2) p.281.1. Available at: ojs.aishe.org/index.php/aishe-j/article/view/281.


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