

**Report of Staff Focus Groups
for
StELA Project**

University of Limerick

**Submitted by
Dr Maeve Lankford, Kaleidoscope Coaching & Facilitation
www.maevelankford.com
5 February 2021**



NATIONAL FORUM
FOR THE ENHANCEMENT OF TEACHING
AND LEARNING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Contents

Executive Summary	3
Introduction	7
Initial responses to definitions and data capture points	10
Legitimate purposes for use of data (Purpose)	13
Data currently being used and gaps or needs identified (Teaching Needs)	21
Feedback from Students	26
Support required to enhance use of data analytics	37
Ethical Concerns	40
Intervention and Obligation to Act	42
Analysis	46
Appendix 1 – Content of Polls	52

Executive Summary

As part of an initiative to analyse existing approaches and potential improvements to Student Feedback across a range of disciplines and learning contexts within UL a number of staff focus groups were conducted.

The staff focus group questions were informed by existing focus group themes used in the SHEILA project and developed by Sinead O’Sullivan, Angelica Risquez and Maeve Lankford, an external facilitator hired to facilitate and report on the focus groups.

In total 31 staff participated in 6 focus groups between 1 and 10 December 2020. There were five mixed groups, comprised of a mix of academic and professional services from multiple disciplines and across different service areas within the University. There was one Management Focus Group consisting of Managers in Central Services and Faculty Management.

Initial responses to definitions and data capture points

The definitions provided to the focus group participants were not broadly agreed and suggest the need to develop an agreed, shared understanding of what is meant by data analytics and learning analytics at the University of Limerick and what is meant by terms such as student success.

There was a lack of clarity as to what the university is trying to do with the data it is collecting, ie. what issues are the organisation seeking to address? This suggests an ongoing need to clarify what the University is trying to address and what data it requires to inform how to address those issues.

Clarity around what the organisation is seeking to address would also ensure that the correct data is being sought and captured by the most relevant or appropriate medium. The use of surveys and learning analytics data were both questioned as to whether the right information is being sought and captured.

Suggestions for a broader focus on data being captured included data on student motivation, social and emotional learning, and student contentment.

Legitimate purposes for use of data (Purpose)

Unprompted, staff identified potential for the use of data analytics in terms of supporting students in the context of retention and progression; predicting student success factors; identifying students at risk, especially in large groups; and to enhance decision making generally.

Based on the poll, participants indicated that they perceived legitimate use of learning analytics in relation to all the areas identified and, in the ensuing discussions, provided evidence of using data in all anticipated areas including: improving service quality; Improving the educational experience in a course/programme; Improving individual students’ educational experience; To inform one’s teaching practice and to inform one’s research practice.

In these contexts, participants identified a number of concerns and issues arising from their engagement with the data up until now. These included difficulties with accessing data and concerns around the reliability and appropriateness of the data being captured; concerns around whether consent is being sought and given; frustration with surveys and their perceived inadequacies. Validity of engagement data was questioned. And concerns were flagged regarding the gender impact of student feedback via surveys, ethical issues around the use of the data captured all of which led to a clear expression of the need for policy around the collection and use of data, the need for training for academic staff to best enable their engagement with the data and

concern for staff workloads in the context of analysing the burgeoning amount of data now available to them and to which they don't necessarily feel competent to respond.

Data currently being used and gaps or needs identified (Teaching Needs)

Typically, participants were comfortable with having data available to them in relation to academic data, engagement data and progression. The main type of data around which concerns were raised was in relation to personal data, including accessing of pastoral services.

Participants identified a wide range of sources of data that they routinely use in the virtual learning environment, e.g., Sulis, Ponopto, Microsoft Teams, Google Surveys, You Tube, Publisher. The student record system, SI, was also highlighted as a source of pertinent data.

When asked what would be useful to staff to enable them to use data more, participants made multiple suggestions including, e.g. enhancing ease of access to and interpretation of data; substantively improving the reliability of the data that is stored centrally; centralised approach and professional support for data analysis, taking a programme level approach to analysis of the data in terms of student progress, and a return to basics in terms of clearly defining the purposes for which the data is to be used.

Feedback from Students

Participants were asked about the feedback they get from students and what were the most effective ways for them to get feedback on their module or programme. A broad range of surveys were identified as being routinely used, including ISSE, Module Surveys, Student Evaluation of Teaching and In-platform polling tools respectively.

The current approach to data capture via surveys came up for criticism, based on the following: role and purpose of surveys is perceived to be unclear; that there is an unmet requirement for more personal and qualitative feedback; concerns regarding the reliability of the survey data collected; the use of survey data in academic promotions and survey fatigue, leading to poor response levels.

The inadequacy of the MSS survey in particular is leading to academic staff generating their own surveys to endeavour to get the feedback they actually need, contributing also to the survey fatigue dilemma. It begs the question whether the MSS is defunct, with multiple staff saying they only use it because it is required for promotions.

The findings in the focus groups suggest that the current centralised surveys negatively impact the feedback loop as a result of e.g.,

- the inadequacy of the questions answered
- poor timeliness of the surveys being conducted
- the delay in reporting the results
- lack or limitation on qualitative feedback to explain the feedback
- lack of local level detail on surveys

These issues would need to be addressed in the anticipated Student Evaluation Policy.

Overall there was no definitive support for opt out from surveys although it was suggested that there is a need for an overall communications strategy which would cover the role and purpose of surveys and clarify issues like opt out.

Participants identified multiple ways in which academic staff in particular currently seek and action feedback from students in more formative and timely ways including engaging with student directly in classes; taking anonymised feedback via post-its at the end of specific classes and responding to issues in the next class; designing more qualitative surveys at module level, and/or using e.g. polling options in Sulis or Moodle.

Such approaches were seen as more effective largely due to the qualitative nature of the feedback achieved, their timeliness, being formative in nature and with more likelihood of quickly closing the feedback loop.

Participants identified a number of options for enhancing the approach to surveys and overcoming survey fatigue, including the need for policy and clarity of purpose, enhanced coordination of surveys, working with in-house expertise to enhance the approach to student feedback, including the role of surveys and exploiting existing platforms to capture student feedback.

There were also some perceived opportunities identified in terms of centralising much of the data contained in surveys to enable comparison across data sets and recommendation of a schedule of surveys including those collecting data for external purposes so that everyone is aware of the timings and can work with them to avoid over surveying at peak times.

One suggestion to enhance things going forward was that it would be helpful to have a communications strategy in terms of how the University communicates with students, within which the approach to surveys could be incorporated.

There was an express need identified for the kind of Student Evaluation Policy intended from this initiative.

Support required to use data analytics more

In terms of enhancing engagement with and use of data analytics, participants highlighted the need for training and support for interpreting the data, including professional support from dedicated staff in central services.

The need for clarity and policy around the use of data was emphasised with a recommendation that the University could base its approach on the JISC code of practice for learning analytics.

And there was a request that staff in central services, who support students, would be enabled to have access to individual student engagement data in order to best address and support individual student needs.

Ethical Concerns

When specifically asked about ethical issues arising from incorporating learning analytics into their teaching practice, participants raised concerns around gender issues with student feedback; concerns around the purpose of the data collected and who has access to such data and the overall need for policy and guidelines governing the collection, use and interpretation of data. These issues can all be addressed in the intended Learning Analytics Policy and Student Evaluation Policy.

Intervention and Obligation to Act

While there were differences of opinion as to whether there is an actual obligation to act in support of students identified as being 'at risk' there was a broad consensus that it is the right thing to do and is actually something that UL does well.

There was also a range of responses in terms of who is best placed to take action, ranging from module coordinators, to personal advisors to team (programme-level) interventions at the local level or involving the First Year Student Coordinator, in particular for very large cohorts.

There was a general perception that in-person responses are probably best, particularly if students are identified as being 'at risk' but there was also a perception that system-based flags are improving all the time and have potential in the longer term. This may become more important if anticipated concerns around staff capacity to respond to all the data and potential needs identified are realised.

Facilitator Observations

Many of the concerns expressed around capture and use of data can be addressed by an appropriate Learning Analytics Policy and the need for a Student Evaluation Policy was essentially endorsed.

Positive examples of successful interventions to support students identified as being at risk during academic year 202-21 were shared and could be used to demonstrative the potential inherent in such an approach.

The idea of creating communities of practice to explore the potential of learning analytics and share good practices in terms of application could be explored to empower teaching staff in relation to the use and application of learning analytics.

Challenges around storage of data and comparability of data sets, the accuracy of the data and reports produced all need to be addressed as a matter of urgency, both to enhance staff perceptions of the reliability of the data and to actually enable staff to do their work more easily.

Participants acknowledged the need for training and requested centralised support for interpreting data, both of which are suggested as important requirements to empower staff to use the data more comprehensively.

Participants provided multiple examples of alternative feedback approaches that are perceived as better than surveys and enhance closure of the feedback loop in more effective and timely ways. A more holistic Student Evaluation Policy would articulate and legitimise such approaches to student feedback, including incorporating these alternative feedback models and their application as evidence for academic promotions purposes.

Report of Staff Focus Groups

Introduction

The University of Limerick 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 a national survey to multiple 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 negative 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 Staff Focus groups were developed by Sinead O'Sullivan, Angelica Risque and Maeve Lankford.

The following is the report of the Staff 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, six staff focus groups were conducted as follows¹. The mixed groups comprised of a mix of academic and professional services from multiple disciplines and across different service areas within the University. The Management Focus Group consisted of Managers in Central Services and Faculty Management. In total 31 staff participated in 6 focus groups between 1 and 10 December 2020.

Staff Focus Group – 1 Dec 10am (Mixed group)
Staff Focus Group – 1 Dec 12pm (Mixed group)
Staff Focus Group – 7 Dec 10am (Mixed group)
Staff Focus Group – 7 Dec 2pm (Mixed group)
Staff Focus Group – 8 Dec 10am (Mixed group)
Staff Focus Group – 10 Dec 4pm (Management Focus Group)

After the initial two focus groups on 1 December the questions were revisited to review some wording and the order in which they were presented to enhance the progression of the discussion among participants. All focus groups focused on the same key themes, including:

1. Legitimate purposes for use of data
2. Data currently being used and gaps or needs identified
3. Feedback from students
4. Support required to enhance use of data analytics
5. Ethical concerns
6. Intervention & Obligation to act

The outputs from the Focus Groups are provided below with any comments from the Management Focus Group participants being identified separately as requested with the following identifier: (MFG).

In general, there was good participation and engagement from all attendees. Participants in all Staff Focus Groups were advised that their attendance was being noted and confirmed to Sinead O'Sullivan, Director of Quality at UL.

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.

¹ Staff Focus Group – 1 Dec 10am (Mixed group) – 4 participants
Staff Focus Group – 1 Dec 12pm (Mixed group) - 6 participants
Staff Focus Group – 7 Dec 10am (Mixed group) – 6 participants
Staff Focus Group – 7 Dec 2pm (Mixed group) – 5 participants
Staff Focus Group – 8 Dec 10am (Mixed group) – 5 participants
Staff Focus Group – 10 Dec 4pm (Management Focus Group) – 5 participants

A composite report of all focus groups is provided below, with key themes and any recommendations from focus group participants being captured under each respective theme. In terms of having an indication of the level of support for any particular idea or suggestion, this can be seen in the volume of responses around any particular topic or issue.

All quotes are verbatim and in italics, including any comments captured from the Chat function.

Initial responses to definitions and data capture points

Focus groups typically opened with the sharing of two slides to help frame the discussion. The first was a definition of learning analytics as:

“The use of student data to understand and enhance teaching and learning with a view to optimising student success” (NFETL, DESSI)

A statement was made that learning analytics benefits from a range of education data, including academic data, personal data, and engagement data, collected from online or physical learning environments. The following slide was used to demonstrate the range of data collections points within UL currently where data is collected on students. And there was a related poll that invited participants to identify the various sources of data they currently use.

COLLEGE APPLICATION FORM
Name, Address, School, Leaving Cert Subjects, Leaving Cert Results, Points, HEAR/DARE information, grades from other 3rd level programmes

number of times logged into Sulis/Moodle, notes viewed, coursework submitted on time

Module Satisfaction Survey (MSS)

Student Survey.ie

Exit Survey Results
Module and Programme Surveys

EXAM RESULTS

Student Use of Learning Centres

Visits to the library, articles downloaded, books borrowed

Quizzes, coursework results, end of semester results, I grades, feedback to students

This definition of learning analytics, the slide showing data collection points and subsequently the poll relating to uses of data were all a bit contentious indicating perhaps a lack of a shared understanding among the University community of what is meant by data analytics and learning analytics. There was some concern expressed around data capture and whether there were appropriate guidelines and regulations in place to govern the collection of and access to all the data identified. Concerns raised are captured under the following headings, allocated by facilitator

- Definitions and Terminology
- Lack of clarity around the role and purpose of the data being collected
- Sources of data used in UL

(i) Definitions and Terminology

Language that came up for discussion included terms like ‘student success’, ‘student attainment’ and ‘student retention’. All of which were considered to be poorly defined, or lacking an agreed understanding as to what they meant. This leads to a lack of clarity as to what is the objective of the University and how can progress or achievement be measured, e.g.,

“It's all around student retention, student progression, try to promote better student retention or progression in kind of a, a, often in the absence of an overarching understanding of what we

mean by student success or even what retention targets are. But anyway, we do it in order to promote student retention, student success in whatever that means”

(ii) *Lack of clarity around the role and purpose of the data being collected*

The issue of the institution and individuals within it being clear as to the role and purpose of the data being collected was raised as being very important and not clear currently in UL

*And it really has to be very, very clear as to what data is actually being collected for someone using online tools, particularly what data is being collected, what's being circulated, why it's being circulated and what it's being used for. And I'm not so sure we're being transparent about that. We're **not** being transparent about it.*

A participant in another group put it this way:

“One other broad question is, what is the objective/problem we are trying to solve with student data? Is it to increase QCA? Increase Student satisfaction? Retention? Evaluate certain aspects of programmes, e.g., how do HEAR/DARE students progress through the Uni? All of these?”

One explanation offered for what is being collected was that it is what the infrastructure provides and that what's perhaps more important is the use to which it is put:

“like some of the data that we collect its inherent in the model of the system that's being used... I suppose it's a case of what do we do with it?”

This point was developed in another group to highlight the need for more discussions on this topic

“I'm much more interested in, like, what kind of data capture, should we be actually using and like data capture across so many different domains and competence areas... so I'm kind of thinking about data capture in terms of if you're talking about retaining students. We have to have data capture and learning analytics beyond just academic achievement or attainment.”

Another participant in the management group also acknowledged that there is data that is available or can be collected, but should it be?

“So there's data that we capture, that we can capture, but really the question is should we? And are we allowed to? And is it appropriate to capture that? And I'm not even necessarily talking about the GDPR issues, I'm really talking about whether it's the right thing to do?” (MFG)

(iii) *Sources of data used in UL*

Regarding the poll shared which identified the areas from which data is gathered currently a significant concern was flagged by one participant:

“I think, actually, there's huge assumptions underpinning that entire list [name] in terms of learning like having data in terms of engagement with any of the learning centers in UL, what exactly, I would have no interest in that. Because what does it tell me? It actually tells me nothing really, that's from my professional opinion and I think, you know I'm, I think in terms of like if you look at the graduate attributes, if this is what the University of Limerick aspires to in terms of our students that exit our programmes then we should be mapping and gathering data in terms of those attributes as they go through our programmes. Equally Excellence, you know, and educational excellence and attainment is one of those kind of reflected in those but you know, we have a national mental health crisis at moment, you know, so we have a huge amount of students across all our faculties ahm, you know, suffering from mental ill-health, well being issues, etc. you know, and how do we capture data and I know, I appreciate what you're saying [name] in terms of like that's sensitive and personal data, but actually I think if we really, if we're really interested

in in capturing data and learning analytics we've got to look at the broad gambit in terms of what we know from the evidence actually supports young people's learning and capture data on that."

When asked for suggestions of data that could be sought additionally that would address the current gaps, the following were suggested:

"there's a whole body of evidence supporting focusing on student motivation for example. And motivation in terms of promoting learning across any learning experience. That'd be one body of evidence in terms of their motivations for selecting UL, their motivations for selecting particular programs, data capture on that. [And] There's a whole body of evidence out there to say that if you focus on social and emotional learning, for example, and use evidence informed interventions to support those outcomes, it will equally result in academic academic attainment as well as social and emotional learning outcomes."

The poll around data collection points was seen to have one particular significant gap currently also. Specifically the gap related to in-platform polling tools on the likes of Sulis or Moodle, which anecdotally, are being used a lot by staff, particularly in this current academic year due to the volume of on-line teaching.

"that sort of polling technique [on Sulis or Moodle] ...I don't think that is fully captured in that list." (MFG)

One participant in the senior management group also indicated a perceived need to broaden the data that's being captured to better enable measurement of student success and happiness/contentment

"There's a huge number of other factors that they align to student contentment, student success, that aren't academic: clubs and societies, the external stuff, you know, access to the library, accessing our, you know, medical, clinical, psychological supports. They're all wrapped up in the same envelope. And I think if we we distill this down, the academic is almost the outcome of a happy student ... And if we can use data analytics in some way to ascertain whether a student is content, that's got 100 different meanings, then we can start, I think, to delve into well how do we make the student actually feel like they belong, which I think is a big part of contentment. ... I think, fundamentally, that's what I'm looking at this across the border and really the outcome has to be student-tailored, if that makes sense?"

Another participant, while having concerns about over scrutinizing students, felt that if we are attempting to support student success or student attainment, then we need to focus on the student and not the module:

"if this is about student success or, you know, then students experience, then yes, I think it will be, you know, helpful to come actually zoom on zoom in on the student and not the module"

Legitimate purposes for use of data (Purpose)

All focus groups were invited to share both the potential they saw for learning analytics and specifically the purposes for which they used the data available to them currently. In this instance, learning analytics were defined as benefitting from “a range of education data including academic data, personal data and engagement data collected from online or physical learning environments”. Participants were invited to complete a poll on what they thought would be “legitimate purposes for the university to use such data?” Five areas were identified in the poll:

- to improve service quality;
- to improve the educational experience in a course/programme
- To improve an individual student’s educational experience
- To inform you about your teaching practice
- To inform your research practice

Discussion around the potential of learning analytics is captured first, followed by a capture of participant responses under each of the poll headings.

At the end of this section there is a summary of concerns expressed relating to existing data and its uses and suggestions for improving same.

Potential of learning analytics

In the opening of one particular mixed group, a participant from Support Services shared the view that there is great potential in learning analytics, in terms of supporting student retention and progression and that it would be great to have a comprehensive approach to managing same

“a lot of the students that need interventions need help, they need outreach, you know, and I suppose our use of learning analytics could make a huge difference in terms of prevention, retention and progression and we’ve done some small bits and pieces on it but I suppose a comprehensive structure for the college and coherent path would be fantastic.”

Another in a different group saw great potential for the use of the data and felt it would be a tool to help predict student success and make it easier to recruit the right students to oversubscribed programmes:

“I think I’d say enormous potential if we could get at more of the data. For instance, at the moment, we want to we’re expect, experiencing some problems with failing students. And what we would like to do is find out what predicts a good student. ... we would very much like to look at what predicts student success so that we can make sure that we are taking the right students because we have very oversubscribed programs so selection is very important, and we would like to get more information on what predicts student success” (MFG)

Others saw potential in using the data to identify students at risk, particularly in large groups:

“I think, part of it as well is to identify at risk students as well, ... See what their engagement with help identify groups of students or individual students perhaps, using groups in the larger classes anyway, that aren't engaging with material or you know, through a combination of engagement materials or are doing poor in assessments or whatever it is, or particular types of assessments that you can use the data”

“cohorts, like those receiving SUSI grants you know if they don't automatically fall into HEAR or DARE or mature students status, they're still more vulnerable in terms of course choice and things like that. So being able to maybe have targeted contact with students that are on SUSI grants or

that belong to particular cohorts means that then they're aware maybe of consequences or are able maybe to discuss potential decisions at a time that would make a big difference to them."

Another felt that the potential in the data was to support making more informed decision:

"Just quantifying things isn't it, you know, we all have our opinions, but you need to put numbers to opinions and that's what helps you make an informed decision."

Improving service quality:

One participant identified using the data to assess the impact of a centralised initiatives for students to support their retention and progress:

"I'm collecting it as a quality control mechanism in one sense to see is [initiative] having any effect"

Other participants on the services side saw data collection as being about improving the service:

"We just do a survey every two years and but we do use the data. I think that's the critical thing. And if you have, when we gather it we try to use this and it will very much inform service delivery."

"we've got a wealth of data there now coming in around the type of service requests, the type of issues that students are raising and and obviously at one level, yes, we're going to do, you know, some root cause analysis to look at why the queries are coming in, how do we improve our service based on that?"

Improving the educational experience in a course/programme

An example was provided about the way in which learning analytics were used this academic year to support students by taking a programme-level approach to the data and making interventions on that basis

" This year, like they got together and actually looked at, you know, at risk students across different modules as well because they were using a similar online platform. And I think they were able to identify, you know, okay, these groups of students are struggling across the board. Maybe some are just [specific subject] and again it just helped inform, but that the key point was at a program level."

Improve individual Student's educational experience

One participant, based on their role in supporting students perceived a positive role for learning analytics in giving students timely feedback on their performance, how to address gaps and where to locate support when needed:

So I would see it as the benefit of learning analytics as being a means to provide feedback to students in a more regular fashion. ... if students would have access to this kind of data, it will give them an idea of their progress throughout the semester, highlight areas in need of improvement and and maybe provide suggestions as to how to go about improving those areas. And typically to link, to link students with the supports that are there ..."

The example was given of an initiative to support students at risk, using data analytics. The perception was that this enhanced the timeliness and effectiveness of the intervention and built on pre-existing interventions

"... until this year I would have always used the deficient grade list after semester one to make contact with all students who've been on that list, ... [this year] we have used analytics to reach out to students that were struggling in three modules or more in [name of school] and again it, I

suppose, has made a huge difference in terms of some students who you wouldn't have known why they were struggling that you get the personal reason and other students who may have been cruising or not doing enough are getting the pinch in time that they're not possibly going to avoid being on the deficient list. So I see huge I'm doing as much as I can with it and see huge potential for it being done in a structured way across the university."

And one participant shared the experience of using the Sulis data to help identify students at risk this academic year, and putting supports in place in response to that. In this instance also it was clear that these types of interventions were routine, but that having the data available from the online platforms this academic year made it easier:

between the five module leaders on the [discipline]program, we were able to look at all the Sulis activity stats and use all of those metrics. And we worked with, [student support services] to kind of identify the most at risk students. By at risk, I mean the ones that were literally were just not engaging, were very, very low in terms of activity, logins, views, etc. ... we could identify support tutorials and particular modules that type of thing. I'd always looked at those anyway. But I think has been even more valuable in a Covid 19 kind of a sense when everything is online."

A similar example was shared in a different group of an intervention in a different discipline. First year students, considered to be at risk were identified based on data available from multiple platforms and contacted with the support of the First Year Student Coordinator. These types of interventions were routine in past years, but the suggestion was that the availability of all the data in 2020/21 made the work easier to identify students at risk:

"we've been doing that all along but it made it easier this year because we have more data now because people are giving tests more often so we have more reliable data that way. And people are using Sulis so again, we can use the engagement part of Sulis. People have recorded lectures, so we can look at, we can look at engagement with Ponopto for example."

To inform one's teaching practice

This was one area in which participants generally saw a role and positive purpose for the use of data in particular student feedback in surveys and polls (see separate section on surveys). In relation to learning analytics, the response was a bit more nuanced, e.g.

One participant saw opportunities for using data to enhance one's teaching,

"I find it particularly useful for seeing how students are interacting with my materials and what they seem to be spending longer on, what they don't seem to be spending any time on so it can I find it really useful for informing you know the resources that I develop, the ones that I, you know, put more work into, you know, because they've had difficulties with things and and also seeing how they're interacting with each other as well so I you know I would be find useful for how they're engaging on discussion forums, how many other messages, they've read, you know, does that inform how good or bad their responses are and things like that."

Another respondent expressed doubts about the usefulness of learning analytics in terms of one's own development as a teacher, at least in part because of a sense of not fully understanding the analytics and how to use them:

*"Can I be a little bit controversial here and say that I have some doubts. I mean, I, I obviously look at it [data e.g on Sulis] and I use it ... But I, for me personally, and this might have to do with the fact that I'm a qualitative person, so I don't **get** analytics that much and I found a. I'm not sure if I'm using the analytics setup properly. ...but also the other thing for me is that I also have found that sometimes I ... I was getting too obsessed with looking at these analytics and I'm not sure if that was particularly helpful"*

Another in the same group felt similarly:

"I don't know if the analytics help me develop in any kind of way in terms of teaching, but they're useful information in terms of maybe identifying at risk students. ... I got 4.6 or 4.7 out of five, that's meaningless, especially if there's only a small response rate. It's often the qualitative feedback where some students might point out some of the things 'I wish this was done, I wish that was done'. 'Okay, I can do that'. I often get way more out of that."

Participants in the senior management group clearly saw a role for using the data to inform oneself around how teaching practices and approaches are going. However, they did not perceive there to be a need for line managers of academic staff to have access to data relating to individual staff engagement data or survey responses:

"it's useful for your own development as a lecturer, but I don't think you could, you know, it wouldn't be any use to me as a line manager"

"There's a challenge for me as an academic with the linking of satisfaction to academic performance I think because it is a slippery slope. ... I don't think that would work necessarily"

In terms of teaching development, some groups talked about the benefits of being able to come together to share different approaches to teaching practice generally and in relation to the use of data analytics in teaching in particular e.g responding to, and to know what data is being used to identify, at risk students, and gave examples of coming together at programme or Faculty level in communities of practice.

To inform one's research practice

The view was expressed that some of the learning analytics data may well be of interest to some academic staff in the context of their research,

"... almost like an incentive. I think sometimes for staff as well know that that you can use that certain analytics to kind of help inform kinda or to analyse it in a research kind of way as well"

However, it was also cautioned by one participant that educational research shouldn't be assumed to be something that is relevant to every academic:

"every academic cannot be researching education, you have lots of other things to research. ... So if I'm researching education A) I'm not really I'm not the right person to do it and B) I'm ignoring the other research that I need to do."

Another raised the need for there to be policy around the use of data and how it can be accessed, indicating that for those who have already been doing research in this area, it has been very difficult to get access:

"There's a wealth of data there. But often it's very hard to get access to that. And I think a lot more can be done with it. Now we have managed to get it in the past, the data, but it's proven, it's usually very, very difficult to get and you have to get lots of different approvals from very senior people in the university. ... I think a lot more could be done, but maybe a better defined policy around what can be accessed, how it can be accessed etc would really help things."

And later from the same participant

"... From research, from actually doing research with a lot of this data, it would just be useful if there was clarity. So I for instance, I am chasing more data right now and I've emailed everybody from [name] to [name] to [name]. No response from anybody, and you know, again, we're looking for anonymized data ... nothing hugely I would say sensitive in any way but just no one willing to

give an answer, because one there's no policy or maybe there is, but I haven't seen it and two no one really wants to give the answer."

Other's in a different group raised similar concerns that they felt needed addressing if student data is to be used for research:

I don't think you can do it without their consent or without setting, you know, explicitly telling them at the start that that's what you're going to do. So I just wouldn't agree with this as as the research project without their consent. ... "I think there could also be potentially am confidentiality issues, depending on how it was reported, especially if they were small cohorts"

"there's ethical implications for that [using student data for research] that needs to be sorted: what happens the data, where is it stored, how long is it stored for, what it's used for"

Issues arising:

(i) *Problems with the current data and availability*

Participants in the senior management group identified some problems with data, currently, e.g., getting data real time and in usable format:

"the problem is that we don't have real, real time data. So, whatever we do with the cohort, we can test the the adjustments. Okay, only with the next cohort" ... "it is true that we have a lot of data but in terms of real time adjustment mechanism we would need a different setup. (MFG)

"we have the data, but it would have to be put together manually" (MFG)

In another group, a concern was expressed that the data being captured is too minimalist in nature and that there needs to be much more discussion about what data is captured

"what we know about effective teaching is that focusing on our, you know, getting data from academic, academic achievement or academic attainment on its own is not always the most useful."

For some, the need that was identified was to ensure that academic staff are aware of the data, what's available to them and how to access it:

"It's a driver in how we evolve infrastructure ... Where are the things that we have that aren't being used as much as we thought they might be used"

(ii) *Student consent*

The availability of additional data, the volume of data available etc. did lead to some expressions of concern as to whether students are aware of all of it and whether appropriate measures are in place in terms of access and use of such data:

"I suppose the only issue really is that we now know a lot about students and to be careful that like, who has access to that data and who that data should be shared with. And and are the students, do they realize that this data is now available?"

"I think students are not are not too bothered ahm very often about data because they think the data we're looking at are the results, you know, the results of of tests. I'm not sure that they realize that we're looking at how many minutes they spend on a VLE or how many minutes they spend on videos..."

One participant shared the experience that students do seem concerned about how e.g. VLE data is used, when it is brought to their attention and that they do not seem aware of all that is monitored currently:

"A couple of years ago, we had a guest lecturer speaking about how the VLE data could be used. ... and the students were very concerned about [it]. I think they didn't realize the extent to which we could monitor them online and they, they themselves were very concerned about that. So I suppose I presume the students are told at some point that we have access to the data, but I don't know how aware it there of our access and and how we're using it because when I do contact students to say, you know, I know that you haven't logged into Sulis, they're always surprised that I know. You know, I don't know the extent to which they're aware of our, of our access to their data."

Others in the same group wondered whether the students really care about data security and how data is used:

"I don't know if they care? They give they give they give data away to everyone else, so I don't know why they'd suddenly be concerned if they give it away to UL and Microsoft"

(iii) *Lack of follow up, difficulties with analysis and comparison of surveys*

In relation to data gathered via surveys, the question was raised whether any work is being done to follow up on the data, beyond what any individual member of staff may or may not do themselves, both in terms of addressing ongoing problems with the same person's approach and using the data to enhance insight and learning across different modules/programmes/disciplines:

From my point of view, like, certainly there, the feedback should be enhancing our teaching ... I suppose what happens at the moment is I can get module feedback I can get some comments on I can generally make changes within my own modules. So I think that's one level, but I also think that the comparative analysis across modules. So if something is working really well in [cognate discipline] And we find that that module is working really well there should be lessons we learned across the university as to those. So, at one level, it's the comparitors of similar modules, but also maybe of dissimilar modules as well. ...And that's the other thing, sorry now, is the tracing backwards. So is every student every year saying [name] does this badly or [name] does this well? And I'm not doing any better or I'm not getting rid of that. So, it's both ways, horizontal and vertical. (MFG)

And another in the senior management group raised the problem of accessing data related to individual cohorts on joint-modules

"For me it is more a cohort [problem], because, for reasons of [discipline], we have, in many cases, various cohorts that are taking the same module. And then you get the information at the module level. ... So, it is extremely difficult to to to reflect on to the individual needs [ie respective needs of the cohort rather than of individual needs of particular students] of this cohort what you observed at an aggregated way level." (MFG)

Another participant in the senior management group highlighted research which pointed to the need to be able to compare outputs from different surveys from the same cohort as any individual survey just gives a snapshot and comparison across surveys can be contradictory:

"So, we need to knit the the surveys or the information together so that we get a proper nuanced Look at the at the topics. ... so more of that being a little bit more, I suppose not cynical, but critical of the data. And yeah, being aware that it's only a snapshot at a point in time, and it mightn't give you the whole picture of the experience of students." (MFG)

And caution was raised around the need to be careful about how to interpret the likes of engagement data:

"I think as well that, I know this is data, but we shouldn't read too much into the data. Because you know if you tell a student 'I'm going to monitor your engagement on Sulis' ahm what's to say that a student mightn't just come along and just log on to Sulis every day and just, you know, be there for a few hours and then go away"

(iv) *Gender implications*

One participant raised concerns regarding the potential gender issues in terms of collecting student feedback and how it is then interpreted:

I guess I would have a slight nervousness about analytics being used to judge lecturing staff I guess. I guess I, you know, I just in terms of how it's how it's collected and how it's ahm who you're surveying and the student attitude and student mood and things like that. I guess I just I read some interesting studies recently that showed that you know, in like male dom, like when the students are primarily male, there's a big impact on how they rate female lectures.

(v) *Ethical issues in use of the data captured*

One participant, raised questions that need clarification around whether and how academics can use data from learning analytics in one's research:

"a lot of people want to use this data beyond the immediate need to respond, to respond to their immediate class, but also as a kind of a learning, teaching and learning research area. So, this is where I come in, so there's questions about how do we use it? Can we use it given the GDPR and consent issues involved if I want to use it beyond, beyond my immediate classroom."

When asked specifically what the concerns are that need to be addressed in this context the following was provided:

"first of all, people were not sure if they had to go through the ethics committee or not. And I have to admit I wasn't sure either because it sort of falls within a grey area. Because you can treat it as a completely anonymized sort of archival data, in which case you would not necessarily need to ask for consent from participants, because they are not identified in it. But also you could see that identifiable data, where a student is not aware of that, you know, perhaps you're interested in writing a research paper, you know, using these kinds of statistics and should their consent be asked for and so on, this is I suppose the question."

Other's in a different group raised similar concerns that they felt needed addressing if student data is to be used for research:

I don't think you can do it without their consent or without setting, you know, explicitly telling them at the start that that's what you're going to do. So, I just wouldn't agree with this as as the research project without their consent. ... "I think there could also be potentially am confidentiality issues, depending on how it was reported, especially if they were small cohorts"

"there's ethical implications for that [using student data for research] that needs to be sorted: what happens the data, where is it stored, how long is it stored for, what it's used for"

(vi) *the need for policies*

The view was expressed that there is a need for policy around the collection of data and how it can be used.

"we do need a policy around appropriate use. So collecting data is one thing and I think that we have less choice about the data we collect but we certainly have quite a bit of choice of how as an institution we use that data or what is the culture and ethics around how we use that. And that culture, I think is something that's evolved, it's, it's it's, it's something that almost grows

inherently and it's probably set, you know, from the top down. So those are discussions that probably we haven't had enough of."

It was further suggested that there is some urgency around these discussions and the need for policy at this point in time:

"I think that's really important because if we don't get those [policies] really quickly people will, their backs will go up against data collection. So that's really important."

(vii) Staff capacity to engage with data

A couple of participants in different groups raised the issue of whether staff even have the bandwidth to take on the workload in analysing the data now available to them:

I am no learning technologist. I could do with [training] ... I use SULIS analytics to focus on student engagement with materials, but I find it doesn't tell me a whole lot to be honest, you know, I'm getting stats in terms of who's accessing the material week by week and who's not. But that's it and what I can do with that is a whole other issue then in terms of even management workload,

"I just think we probably need to be a little bit careful kinda getting a little bit too, how would you say, data focused and having too much data coming in because at the end of the day, like I suppose we have to teach, we have to research and we have to provide service to university and there's only so much you can do as a lecturer" ... Like, even when it comes to student numbers and stuff. Sure, like we'd like 55 normally for first year [discipline] and now it's up to like 90 or something, 95 it was so, like, if you're having data coming in from twice the amount of students and then you have more data coming in than you previously had, there's probably going to be some kind of admin concerns there and you won't know where to look."

Data currently being used and gaps or needs identified (Teaching Needs)

Participants were shown a slide with all the key data collection points on a student journey through their academic programme/s in UL and asked which types of data they felt were most useful and what they'd like additionally. See poll

In the ensuing discussion, on one level, it was felt that all the data that was available was reasonable to have available, the bigger issue being the purpose to which they are put

"they all seem quite reasonable to me, from I suppose an initial standpoint, but it's how they're administered after that that are the key points."

Typically, participants were comfortable with having data available to them in relation to academic data, engagement data, progression data. The main type of data around which concerns were raised was in relation to personal data including e.g. engagement with pastoral services. While staff felt it can sometimes be helpful for them to know some of these details about a student, the means of it being revealed to them was important, typically directly from the student being what's valued, and that knowing it via data analytics did not feel helpful or particularly appropriate, e.g.

"One person came to me and said, I feel really out of place in my course because I've come from like a really basically a really lower economic background than a lot of his, his friends. Something about the disclosure, the one on one disclosure and the fact that it was disclosed in person in a one on one meeting, that makes it feel a lot safer to me than the way, than the idea of being connected as part of analytics. There's something there about the personal relationship."

Another expressed a concern that having access to such personal data could over-bias one. And that the issue is not the personal situation of the student but rather clarity about the nature of the support they require:

"For me, I'm just not sure. I'd be concerned it would over-bias me. ... It's not about their background. It's about how that changes what I need to do for them."

The concern was also expressed about having this kind of personal data held centrally and the uses it could be put to, e.g for profiling

"... if the, the university or a data service is storing this [personal data], I'm just concerned that, I mean, it's the same concerns that [other names] are talking about. I'm worried about like profiling or something basically like that in the future..."

The point was also made in respect of student survey responses that they would need to be held as aggregates only:

"I think with the with the survey responses. Well, I think that kind of muddies the water as well because students are offering that opinion Generally in relative confidentiality and and don't expect those responses to be tied to them."

Following the poll, when asked if there were other types of data that staff used, one responded said they regularly use the student record (SI) system, albeit largely to verify data they already had:

"I use the SI system quite a lot. So that's the student record system and for different reasons. So to em, I was the course director for nearly 10 years so I often found that I had to check students results to check grades for a whole group and I guess it most, you know, in most cases, it was just to double check the the information that I had"

Additional sources of data that participants talked about using included:

- Panopto
- Microsoft Teams
- Google Surveys
- You Tube (based on usage of videos uploaded)
- Publisher

Gaps or needs identified with existing data

When asked what would be useful to staff to enable them to use the data more, including for their own professional development, multiple suggestions made as follows:

- Issues with access to existing data
- Need for option to take a Programme-level approach to the data
- Reliability of the data
- Knowing how to interpret the data
- Requirement for a centralised approach and professional support for data analysis
- Requirement for clearly defined purpose for use of data

The issues raised are identified under each heading below

(i) Issues with Access to existing data

Participants mentioned the need for ease of access to the data, including it being more centrally available and accessible

“Easily accessible. And in one place.”

“I think there's a number of data sources that we can use, one of the issues that we're trying to struggle with is actually making them all centrally available so for things like the ISSE the survey data or the student survey data.” ... “It would nice to be able to log on to a BI dashboard that links to a data library, that takes live data out of every system that we're dealing with. And that's something I think, you know, we can work towards.”

A similar point was raised in terms of easier access to data across multiple sites for students on the same programme:

“It's kind of aggregating all that information together and making it available in one way, and besides individual exports from Sulis”

Another participant indicated that existing data, e.g. Video usage on Microsoft Teams, is not considered adequate, leading currently to the need to create a work around:

*“I'm having to do things in slightly roundabout way to to get certain data. So all of all of my modules, you have a lot of video and so whether that's pre- recorded, segmented or streamed video and what I don't really get from the, the current suite of tools for Microsoft is good analytical data about video engagement. So I'm actually uploading my videos to YouTube after the fact, because they have far more comprehensive tools down to you know how long people watch videos where they're turning them off and retention rate, **device** (sic), etc. Because then trying to adjust your content to suit the medium is quite important, especially working remotely where you're doing complex topics that may require multiple screens. So students are watching it on their phone while doing it on on computer and I'm getting that kind of data back from YouTube.*

Repeated references were made to the difficulty in accessing data for eg. Athena Swan applications and accreditation purposes and how a lot of work has to be done to clean that data up, (see also bullet iii below) e.g.:

“ A lot of the data is really important for Athena Swan applications. And in order, I have looked at lots of data over the years and sometimes it's very difficult to get accurate data in terms of, you know, female, male breakdown and so if that was easy available and accessible I think that will make the application process for Athena Swan easier.”

Such difficulties were confirmed by a participant in central services, who acknowledged the difficulty in responding to such requests whether they arise from individual academics in the conduct of their research or whether in the context of Athena Swan etc:

“just to point out, like those reports are like trying to pull them down from the system, trying to get accurate data, it's actually quite difficult. It's quite a task and it's lots of manipulating different Excel files to pull together.”

(ii) Need for option to take a Programme level approach to the data

Participants in various groups spoke to the benefits of being able to compare data across modules in a programme and being able to take a programme level approach to responses e.g. in relation to student workloads

“Student workload data (per module/learning activity) - I would find really useful in my particular role.”

“You can have conversations with other with other people to say, well, when I look at the number of students clicks in sulis versus their engagement with the library services, somebody is able to pull up the same amount of data, look at the same data and pull the same thing and say, well, actually on my module it looks completely different so it's probably not an indicator that you can trust.”

“to do a program level type approach. I think it would be quite useful.”

The programmatic approach was also seen as having potential to enable interventions that support student wellbeing as well as addressing academic issues, e.g.

“this idea of a teaching team across first years to get together and go okay you know you're doing five essays. I'm doing 10 essays, you know, could we cut back here? And that's, you know, that's a kind of, you know, there's a due process there in terms of academic side, but there's also the wellbeing side of the students.”

(iii) Reliability of the data

Participants felt they needed to be able to trust the data,, and gave examples of how currently there are problems when data is aggregated or when e.g. students repeat a year

“if they were trustworthy. You know, a lot like [name] said already, a lot of the data that gets aggregated is incorrect in some way, things are counted twice, are counted in the wrong places. You'd want to be sure that there was not just automated analytics, but that there was some human intervention to check them.”

When asked if there were specific concerns about the reliability of the data, an example was shared of trying to assemble data for an Athena Swan application and that what was provided from the centralised system was “completely incorrect”:

*“again, I go back to to Athena Swan on this one. We had to do a lot of analysis on students coming into various programs, you know, females and males, but the data was incorrect with Because we have a common first year so you've all these students 100 maybe 200 students and then at the end of the first year they go into their various programs, to choose one of four programs. But the data behind all of that was incorrect you know, because the systems weren't in place to kind of to look at that data and I was lucky because I, at the time was course leader. So I had all the data. and when I saw the data that someone else had got from the centralized system I said you know, that's all incorrect and it completely skewed **everything**, it was completely incorrect.” ... “Other kind of data , data that was incorrect ahm, ahm data handling of, you know, interviews and who got the jobs and who weren't, didn't get positions again for Athena Swan male, female, ahm break down, let's say,”*

(iv) Knowing how to interpret the data

It was suggested that staff need to know whether to correlate data and what points to meaningful insights, e.g. in identifying an at risk student:

“You know when you see people not engaging with the library, people not engaging with Sulis, people not engaging with assignments and all these kind of things that, that they're a signals, you know that they're correlated with other problems or other issues that we that we care about as well.”

On a related issue, the argument was made that there's a real need to establish baseline data, at disciplinary level, that enables the identification of predictive relationships with the data:

“So there is some preliminary steps, really, to take to to have some predictive models in place. ... I suppose that are kind of at the program level is kind of looking at some kind of indicators. Not only risk indicators, but also success indicators, I suppose. And yes, in perhaps where some reliable predictive relationships happening. And so that's kind of a work that needs to happen and needs to be as well kind of disciplinary aware I suppose.”

(v) Requirement for a centralised approach and professional support for data analysis

Participants perceived a benefit to being able to access data centrally

“I would love to be able to get different data sets and assess both, assess different elements and see where what kind of picture that throws up for me. And that goes back again to make my point about a centralized approach to data management or analytics, learning analytics.”

“The people in the group has spent varying numbers of years, decades, maybe at UL and and I would suggest that it's not unfair for me to say that right now, if we wanted to get a particular piece of data or you know numbers for something, it's quite difficult to even know where to start to get that. And I think the same, we'd find ourselves probably in the same scenario in relation to data and given its importance and its underpinning contribution to all of our planning and our strategy development. Yeah, I think that it would be certainly worth a look to see if a centralized you know, a person, you can tap or a unit or an office that you can tap and say in the student survey or in the module satisfaction survey or in any of the big surveys can you send me, can you give me, Can you tell me, because it's fine to create a generic dashboard and that would also be helpful, but also giving people the option to tease that data out and understand it themselves a little bit better at a module level, at the course level, at department and faculty level, I think would be very instructive.”

“I agree 100% with [name], I think we've got so many things we have to respond to now and write to and being able to pull out the data can be really, really difficult without...a mechanism for doing it.”

“we can see already there’s significant more asks coming from around University around data and it might be useful to have the tools and resources [training and support from central services] in order to facilitate those asks”

There was a specific request for more timely, accessible and centrally located data from the Access Office:

“There’s data that I get in such a fractured way that I actually can’t make use of it and that’s specifically related to data from the access office and specifically lens reports from students because they come at a very odd cadence and they’re they’re decentralized, so it’s all located in in your email. And modules can be shared between other teaching staff. So for instance, I’m a module coordinator for however many modules. So I get the lens reports, but I may only teach a certain amount of it and then the other person may not know that we have a student who has a physical impairment or we have a student who has a hearing disability. And none of that is centrally stored, centrally accessible. So it’s very hard to take into account the almost those individual needs. Then when you’re designing your, your projects or your teaching content, etc.”

(vi) *Clearly defined purpose for use of data*

One participant expressed the need for more clearly identified purposes institutionally, for which the data is to be used:

“I think we’d have to have a main purpose or a few main purposes discussed as an institution, you know, whether that’s we’re trying to maximize the number of students getting graduation or you’re trying to improve completion rates of, you know, as we’ve spoken about HERE or DARE students or you know whatever the case may be, that we have clear purposes that we could, yeah, use them [data analytics] for. I think that will be important.”

Feedback from Students

Participants were asked about the feedback they get from students and what were the most effective ways for them to get feedback on their module or programme. They were also asked what other ways there are to get feedback from students and whether students should be able to opt out of receiving requests to complete surveys other than key institutional surveys (ie surveys related to the business or operation of the University).

One participant in the senior management group spoke of the need to distinguish clearly between different data sets captured in the different surveys:

"I think we need to distinguish as well between the aggregate data, the program data and the module data that we get because the MSS is on the module basis, whereas the Exit survey is program based and then your progression is your individual student, whereas the national survey data is national. And as an aside, because people are using Sulis more and Moodle or whatever they're using now, module, module leaders are using polls within Sulis, so just to test the temperature of the class and see how they're doing and ask them, you know, for example, like at the beginning of my module, I would have asked a number of questions to get an idea of the personal data of the students in general, like how many people would have done, [subject] for the Leaving Cert just things that you would have had a feel of in the classroom before. So you're polling the students you're getting data and using that data, whereas that isn't really captured in any of this."

In discussion, a number of different survey's were highlighted, including:

- ISSE
- Module Surveys (MSS)
- Student Evaluation of Teaching (SETs)
- In platform polling tools

In house surveys generally were seen as more likely to confirm or validate a concern the lecturer might have had already, e.g.

"It does highlight some things that maybe you might have been thinking of yourself. You might be wondering what they think of the workload, or something like that and you might see a number of students mention that"

One respondent felt exit surveys in particular were useful, especially when taken longitudinally and that SETs were helpful in a similar way:

"I was a course director for a few years. And when I was, I found the exit report data, especially over time, very useful for working out what students felt at program level about, you know, what was working what wasn't working. So if I mean I think it's the same with the SETs if you get one individual comment it could be just one person who doesn't, who doesn't like a particular approach. But when you're getting a comment repeated over time it gives you more information about what what the students are feeling ahm and what should be changed as a result, or what at least you can discuss with your colleagues and with the course team based on, you know, longer term data. So I think those kinds of surveys are useful in a longitudinal way rather than in any given year."

Another shared the view that the surveys can actually be counterproductive, which was broadly agreed with and acknowledged by others in the group:

“exit surveys and you know quality review things, and of course we do all these things too but we've found them problematic and less helpful and in some cases even counterproductive. ... [they] kinda seem to assume that the students on receipt of something that is delivered rather than kind of participating in something that's interactive and where they have a stake in, an active stake and an ongoing stake, in its development sort of as a programme. And that skews or misrepresents the relationship we have with our students.”

ISSE

The value of the ISSE survey in particular was questioned by one participant in particular, with the observation that it was so generalised as to be almost meaningless:

“It's so vague that it's very hard for students to give any kind of an opinion on it, really. And a lot of time goes into pushing that survey. And I don't know where taking the results of it is really a reflection of the student experience at all. So I don't know if there's a policy change required in UL for that but I mean in terms of students being able to give their feedback I don't know that ISSE certainly does it. ...certainly I would question the usefulness of ISSE as a measure in making practical changes in this institution.”

MSS

The MSS in particular came up for critical comment

“... I find the MSS to be useless, quite frankly, it's 8 questions, no detail, What am I going to do with that?”

“I agree that, to an extent the MSS is not very helpful at all because there's no qualitative information”

“I'm just receiving the MSS, you know, data for the current, current semester. The point is that many of the questions that are posed, because one wants to be uniform, they are very generic and they are generic to the point that we cannot really start to match with that in terms of interventions.”

“You got an idea, obviously, if students are somewhat happy, but the phrasing of the questions, the types of things they're asking, it's, it's definitely worse than the SET kind of evaluations done by the CTL, ...the MSS yeah, look it's, it gives you an idea, but that's about it, nothing else.”

“it's usually the rates are very, the response rates are very low, and also the questions are not particularly useful from an educational point of view”

Another participant in the senior management group indicated concern with the low response rate on the MSS and the use of questions that we do nothing about:

“The module surveys and so on just don't collect enough students to make anything of the data. I think that's one problem. The second problem is that we have to stop asking questions that we're never going to do anything about because that really does lead to dissatisfaction, a specific example being the classrooms in our building are terrible and we've been collecting data on how bad the accommodation is you know, every cohort of students mark it down every year and we know there is absolutely no intention to do anything about that. So why do we ask?”

Only one participant in any group indicated they liked the MSS:

“I just think everything needs to be very streamlined and you know, that is the module satisfaction thing I think is very beneficial because it's a nice comprehensive report and exit surveys, the same”

One suggested way to enhance MSS would be to include more open questions:

"I think we need more, this is [name of speaker], open questions as to how the students are feeling. ... I've come from a different university where ahm there was a number of open questions on the survey and actually it was that that I often changed my teaching and assessments from what the students wrote and not the tick boxes that they gave me"

SET

The SETs typically were much favoured over the MSS, in particular because they allow for more qualitative feedback

"The SET in my opinion is far broader, it asks the students, their role, what, how they've contributed. The MSS is is is narrower. It has no qualitative feedback, ... it's it's much narrower in its in its remit"

"...and the SET often really exposes the gap between our mental model of what we're doing and our students' mental models of what's going on."

Issues identified with current approach to surveys

In discussion about the various surveys, participants identified a number of concerns and problems that are grouped under the following headings:

- Role and purpose of surveys unclear
- Requirement for more personal and qualitative feedback
- Reliability of the survey data collected
- Use of survey data in academic promotions
- Survey fatigue

Findings are presented under each of these headings below

(i) Role and purpose of surveys unclear

This issue was also reflected in discussion about the surveys used, where again, there is confusion as to the role and purpose of the surveys, a sense that the right information isn't being collected and that the surveys themselves don't reflect the nature of the education experience being created at UL and the relationships between staff and learners:

"... I think that as a university we should be trying to have a discussion in the first instance about what we're trying to achieve by such teaching evaluations. Again, one is student evaluation of teaching. The other is a module satisfaction survey and even the nomenclature would would highlight variances there as well. So that's just one example, which as it were I think that there is, one is very consumerist driven and the other is more co-creator of learning."

(ii) Requirement for more personal and qualitative feedback

One academic offered the view that personal feedback will trump survey feedback all the time, with the concern being expressed also that feedback in surveys is very context specific but the context isn't always known

"I would say personal feedback, it's far better. ... in written feedback it's the ones who have gripes who will actually say something. ...in survey data, you really have to stand back and say, What the hell is going on here?"

Participants indicated the need to be able to interpret the feedback they're being given by students and that they really need qualitative feedback to be able to learn from such feedback, e.g.,

“So the data to me is the hook to say there's something wrong but it's really getting to talk to them, that's much more important. ... it's the reasoning, like if students are giving me 'bad' for my teaching, I want to know well why do they think I'm teaching badly?”

(iii) *Reliability of the survey data collected*

One participant shared the experience of getting module level feedback that clearly wasn't even for her module:

“sometimes students don't even know which module they're evaluating at the time. I've seen students give me feedback. And I'm like, that's not my module that's someone else's module like how can I believe any of this really”

Another felt that the questions asked (SET) were not particularly well phrased and that students don't actually understand them:

the feedback that I've gotten from the students when I've talked about these these tools. [SETs] is ahm they're phrased in such a way that they don't actually understand the question. So I think, I think, one of them is has comments about learning and they they don't actually know what what that that necessarily means to them.

It was also argued that the survey's give voice to perhaps one disgruntled student who is unhappy with their overall programme choice or module choice and their response skews the overall survey

“there's a certain amount of useful data in there, but at the same time sometimes you can see how one student who's just generally ticked off, with your module or the program they signed up for can completely skew your results and then you get in trouble”

This was seen as particularly problematic when the response rate is very small and polarised:

“in my modules in particular I have experienced small numbers of respondees across the years and more often than not, I find it can be polarized, very much polarised: someone that loving what's going on, or someone that literally like wants out, everything I do is crap.”

(iv) *Use of Survey data in academic promotions*

It was also raised that the issue of the surveys being used to inform promotions was problematic for staff:

“it [survey feedback] is used in things like promotions and that and a lot of people have concerns about this”

“one of the questions and that is around the room and the facilities and like they'll poke like 350 [name of school] students into the Jean Monnet with no left hand desks and suddenly, I'll be flagging across the President's desk for something I have no control over...”

For another, it's the only reason they use the surveys, because they're required for this purpose, they serve no other purpose in terms of student feedback:

*“I do them every year and I do them because they're required for progression and promotion. That is the **only** reason I do them”*

“The problem is that students are just getting fed up with having to complete a survey after survey after survey for every module every semester. And that becomes a problem. Yet we still do them because obviously you know we need them for promotion and things like that”

(v) *Survey Fatigue*

In the context of survey fatigue, inadequate Module Surveys appear to be adding to the problem because it was identified that lecturers choose to do additional surveys of their own because the Module survey isn't asking the questions they need addressing so they also run their own survey:

"I don't think we should base all our decisions on MSS or SETs and they're also limited in terms of the questions they ask. I mean, sometimes I look at the questions and think that's not the way I would phrase it or I end up having to do my own polls or surveys as well because that's not going to capture what I need to know."

"I actually do run my own Google kind of survey kind of data, anonymised surveys of the class where they can write whatever they want. I'd have a few targeted questions, but at least you're able to get to go through what they're writing and pick up on things that might be affecting them or that they're struggling with in the module. So I kinda usually do two of those a semester on top of the CTL, you know, on top of the SET type stuff."

It was suggested by one participant that external demands for data capture add to the survey fatigue:

"There is one other aspect of it as well and some some data collection is mandated OK, so there's external requirements to complete surveys also. And that puts a lot of pressure on the university also, separate to anything that an individual in the institution might want to collect themselves. ..."

One participant from a services area made a plea for enabling surveys e.g. in the context of quality enhancement and quality frameworks, despite the problems with survey fatigue.

"So I suppose we're providing very broad services and frameworks and and my frustration can be that it's very hard to get feedback on specific services without surveying or targeting particular users of services and but I completely understand the survey fatigue"

Opt out from surveys

When time allowed participants were asked their views on whether students should be allowed to opt out from surveys.

Two participants in different groups indicated that there is an existing optout available to students in relation to module surveys, e.g.:

"they have an opt out option there. So they can email to say I don't want to receive this"

This seemed to be surprising to others in the focus group so it may not be well known that this is available?

In terms of whether students should have the opportunity to opt out of all surveys that are not core to university business, the response was not definitive:

"You will have people who will be interested in doing some surveys. So, allowing an opt out. It's hard to know really"

"Personally, I think maybe just not having opt out. People just make the choice whether you want to pitch in or not"

Another expressed a concern that allowing opt outs could skew the results

"I think you got to be very careful. I was listening about the skewing and the biases ... so it can skew both ways [negative or positive] so I'm just a little tentative about that."

And finally another participant suggested that what's needed is an overall Communications strategy for how the University engages with students and that an opt out from surveys would just be a small element within such a wider approach:

"Yes, having a survey mailing list or having an alternative way for dealing with non essential business surveys, as you as you kind of title them is is will be useful ahm but I think there's a wider vision in terms of communications as well in terms of how we ensure that students get critical messages and we don't over burden them with a significant number of other messages, because what happens is when they get lots is they just ignore everything. ...for me, I think it's about trying to tie together coherency, agree, a way of doing it, a structure, a platform and we focus different things in different places, using yeah, Sulis, Moodle or email or web or social etc so that it's it's it's it's a strategy, rather than an individual [approach]"

Alternative/enhanced approaches to student feedback:

Participants identified a number of additional ways that they capture student feedback that they consider to be particularly effective, including:

- Class reps
- In-class engagement with students (particularly in smaller groups)
- Focus Groups
- Focusing feedback on points of difficulty or challenge
- Email
- Using in-platform tools and templates for feedback

The following items the discussion and examples of effective practices under each heading:

(i) Class Reps

In terms of having alternative or better approaches to surveys, one participant talked about internal arrangements in their school for engaging with class reps

"We have consultation forums to meet with Class. Class reps and student reps across all our year groups, program groups. We have staff members that have been assigned the role in you know, in as an objective a position as that can be, ie they mightn't be leading that particular group, to hear feedback from students. Those staff then feed them back to us staff in terms of anyone leading a module. And then we're as you say [name], trying to close the feedback loop in terms of this is how I'm responding to and trying to do it within [that cohort]"

"often, my personal opinion from my experience, some of the actual best feedback we get is often when you have actual really functioning student representatives giving you qualitative feedback on boards and what I mean by functioning class reps you get some class reps, who are excellent who will go off and they will talk to the rest of the group and they will consult with the rest of the class and gather feedback from them and bring that"

(ii) In-class engagement with students (particularly in smaller groups)

Another participant in a different group spoke of having close and regular contact with students which allowed for ongoing feedback which is quickly responded to and which makes the survey's almost defunct, achieving "less than 5% response rate":

"We think we pride ourselves in having a quite close relationship with our students, a very direct one that's in part because of our teaching mode [discipline identified] where we meet our students, sort of in-person on a on a very regular and very frequent basis. And kind of have a very, very short feedback loop that allows us to make adjustments and respond to kind of their comments very quickly."

Another example of a way to collect qualitative and quantitative data in a simple, timely way was to get students to write up comments and concerns on post-its at the end of a class, leave them to complete their notes in private and look at everything together later:

"I wanted to ask [for feedback, I] leave post its on the table and walked out and then they all write something on a post it, good, bad, or indifferent and I stick it up on the wall. And I've got huge feedback from that and it's just very real and they talk to each other. And I've made adjustments to my teaching because of that."

Another concurred (same group, different discipline) that this was a much more effective way to get actionable feedback and expressed frustration that it isn't recognised as such when it comes to promotion/progression:

I've done very, very similar things just leave comment cards after lecture, leave them kind of, you know, make that anonymous and you get, you know, that's where you get really good feedback on what worked this week and you know, you react to that the next week. And it really makes a difference to your teaching and kind of the students see that kind of, you know, actually affects the change and kind of all those things. But it's never entered into any of those sort of quantifiable research and then for things like progression promotion. You asked to submit your SETS and, you know, the students have given you, your feedback. This stuff doesn't show up in the SETs and it's as if you don't kind of bother with student feedback or or stuff, but actually it's it's the other way around, and doesn't, it's not captured. It's not formalized it's not appreciated. But it's the stuff that actually makes a difference."

(iii) Focus Groups

The potential of using focus groups to get qualitative feedback was also highlighted, with the proviso that it not be over-used

"I found very useful when I was doing a class with somebody, instead of a survey gave us a sort of a focus group at the end of the of the of the module and basically they asked us to talk about the three things that we liked and the three things that we disliked about module. I found that very useful. But again, if we if we were to overdo that I think it would, you know, end up probably in the same way."

And another participant from a different group shared successful use of focus groups:

"I also do end of year focus groups with my, with a random assortment of students from my modules, just to get an insight into it because I deal with a lot of one to one and small group teaching. So it's kind of the personal insights are critical for my teaching development"

(iv) Focusing feedback on points of challenge or difficulty

Another suggestion was rather than automatically collecting feedback from whole cohorts, to focus on points of challenge or difficulty and learn from those situations, along the lines of the current practices in IT support where service users are contacted individually about their personal experiences of the service after they've had a problem or complaint:

"at the point where there's not conflict but difficulty or querkinesses in the system. Those are really good learning points. Those are the ones we should be focusing on. Just as an alternative to the open questions as a strategy, I'm just trying to think, those are places to learn."

(v) Email as a source of feedback

In one group a participant pointed to the use of email as a significant source of data and feedback from students:

“I get data from email, a lot of emails. I mean, that's one of the main ways students give feedback I think is, is through email ... I don't invite them and they're not always positive. Truthfully. Often they are, often they are, but they're not always. Sometimes people are upset and they decide to send an email because they're not happy about something. Often it's about their feedback, the feedback they receive. But I do they do collect those emails and and keep them in in one folder so that I can reflect on them at the end of the semester or or more, particularly at the start of the next time I'm teaching that module”

(vi) *Using In-platform tools and templates for feedback*

One participant also referenced using the templates enabled by the VLE to get weekly updates from students on how they are finding the module, enabling adjustments to the teaching approach in real time:

“This year I was using one of these templates in the VLE. It had included that kind of a week-on-week request for how are things, how did things go for you this week? So I found that useful for, again obviously only a subsection of people engage with that, but it's kind of quite formative and as a matter of fact, I did change a couple of things I was planning to do on the way along.”

Enhancing the approach to surveys and overcoming survey fatigue

A number of options were identified as ways of enhancing the approach to surveys in UL and overcoming survey fatigue. These included:

- Need for policy and clarity of purpose
- Enhanced coordination of surveys
- Work with in-house expertise in enhancing approach to student feedback
- Exploiting existing platforms to capture student feedback

Details of the discussion and suggestions are captured under these headings below

(i) *Need for policy and clarity of purpose*

The feeling in one group was that there's a need to revisit the purpose of the surveys, feeling that this has changed over recent years and become more business oriented and wanted to enable comparison over years and periods of time, but which negatively impacts the quality of the feedback generally and it's usefulness in the teaching and learning endeavour:

“what I sense of the past few years that I've been teaching here in UL is that the surveys tend to get much more formalized as we as we go along, and probably for comparative or for reasons of comparison, so that you can sort of extract percentages and kind of compare them over time and all those things. But that kind of pigeon holes or kind of Pins, pins down responses and doesn't allow for that, for that, for that openness and that becomes a sort of a business tool and and less of a qualitative [tool]”

“I agree. I think that there's a pressure to gather evidence. There's a pressure on everyone from different, that this is the way that you can have hard facts as if that's more real you know, in some way. ... I was talking to somebody ... and he read out to me feedback he got from students in 2003 and 2005 when there was less surveying and he got much deeper, longer responses to open questions then you get now because the students really deliberated and wanted to contribute you know, to the enhancement.”

The need for a policy around surveys was shared by a participant on the senior management group:

“So what we do is we over survey your students. And I think we all accept that I think last year we ran about 60 60 -odd surveys amongst lots of different stakeholder groups. And one of the things that we've been very aware of is that we need a survey policy.” (MFG)

It was suggested in another group that such a policy or guidelines would be helpful to ensure a balance of surveying and to ensure there was both quantitative and qualitative data being captured:

“From my point of view, I think there does need to be ... a mixture of quant and qual (sic) type responses so that you can actually delve into what the issue is, as opposed to just identifying that there is an issue. And so getting some free text and allowing students to express themselves while it takes more time to analyze and takes more time to to work through is actually much more useful in terms of just getting a number at the start of it. So I'm from a institutional point of view will be useful if there was some sort of guidelines on how and when and if there was, you know, if we could coordinate that institutionally so that we're not overloading students and you know, maybe that gets tied into other things like quality and everything else. But, like, maybe there's a way of doing things that that isn't just everybody, that isn't just a free for all, essentially, because I think the free for all essentially isn't going to help anybody at the end of the day.”

On a related note, the need was identified for having an agreed data sets that staff can know how to access and use that are the basis of decision making, e.g.

“I suppose it's a case of where do you start to get that [data] and is everybody looking at the same thing again. I come back to that point. So, you know, it's everybody does everybody have equality have access to to things to say, Listen, we know we don't have all of the data sets available to us, but at least this is where you go to get the ones that UL are going to stand over if you're going to make an argument for, for refurbishing a classroom or something like that.”

The need for flexibility in the approach to surveying and feedback was highlighted with the plea for more autonomy at the local level in terms of what get's asked and how. It is suggested that this would also be a policy issue in terms of how that might be enabled:

“And for qualitative data, I would say, we would only need at the core, you know, at the program level or the module level and and you know, we would be best informed on how to gather that because we know why we want it and what we're going to cover. And so, that shouldn't come from the top. That should be whatever our requirement is and we we can collect that then in a way that we know we will get some inputs. You know that I think that kind of thing is rarely done best by survey so we need more flexibility on on you know, at the more granular level to find out exactly what we want to know for the, you know, for the question that we are actually asking.

(ii) *Enhanced coordination of surveys*

Others highlighted the need for a more coordinated approach to surveys

“I think it would be useful, that there would be a schedule of what is definitely going to be collected during the year. I think that would help everyone in terms of timings.”

“[I] Think it's a very good idea. I think that we've seen how effective the central policy hub is now that we can go to one single place and see all the policies. If something like that was crafted to to even be a flag for the rest of us, a bit like the academic timetable and the policy hub to say the index surveys coming, module satisfaction survey, the big mandated ones.”

“... I know all of the different surveys are run with a different purpose in mind and administered by different offices. So CTL, Quality, within the faculties themselves and in the service divisions as well. And I just wonder about the usefulness of centralizing and pooling that data in a kind of a, almost a customer relationship management type idea. I'm not sure that UL has a centralized

support, while it's the Quality office's remit as such, ahm I'm not sure that we put all the right pieces that we put all the pieces into the box for the jigsaw."

"So I was wondering ... whether there'd be a more intelligent way of kind of combining those surveys, rather than just listing them out, kind of what's done separately, at what time, and to kind of combine those because in some cases, I think they ask for similar things, at least you know that ahm different bodies asked for different reasons kind of similar questions in there. They could be merged and distributed kind of, that could be a way to work around that."

"students are being surveyed at the time when they have huge volume of work to submit. It's totally the wrong time of year to be asking students about their modules and teaching because if they feel totally overwhelmed you know, they could just give all negative responses, even though they're actually loving the program."

"It is good to coordinate because, like, what we know is that the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing a lot of the time and that that requires an effort of awareness building on all of us really for for that to work better."

It may be worth noting that when asked directly in one group whether it would be an option to simply survey less frequently and perhaps use more indepth approaches at longer intervals, it was met with some caution, at least on the central services side, although a mixed approach was seen as having some merit:

"our main onboarding experience as an example that happens every August, September. And if if you then say, you can only survey it that once every two years, three years you suddenly miss an opportunity to improve that in the meantime. Now I do agree there are other ways of doing things. And like for us, like engaging with things like students unions and is really valuable in terms of getting feedback, particularly on a service level"

(iii) Work with in-house expertise on enhancing approach to student feedback

A participant in the senior management group suggested the need to totally revisit the way in which student surveys in UL are designed and run, to make them more effective for all concerned and suggested that the expertise for same exists in-house:

"what we're trying to do here is basically survey-based research on a population of 16 and a half thousand students. That's all we're looking at here, and there's good and bad ways to do that. And there's good and bad ways in research and survey design. But we've got a group of experts within UL who know how to do this. And we need to start interfacing with them and controlling access to our populations and getting data out the other end, which is useful and cutting out the questions that're worthless and actually acting upon the data correctly is one of the things"

The sense that there is lots of untapped expertise in house in relation to best practice on feedback was echoed, sometimes with some frustration among participants in other groups

"there needs to be more congruence between teaching and learning and data analytics and the actual research we're doing in UL"

"it's not like there's a paucity of of research on the area either by the way. I mean just there's lots of research out there on formative feedback and the benefits of formative feedback and even how to provide formative feedback ... in a structured way that would improve improve teaching and improved learning... and there's expertise in the University on the area already so it's not, it's not like we're starting from a blank slate here."

(iv) *Exploiting existing platforms to capture student feedback*

There was a very positive view shared by one participant on the potential of the existing infrastructure offers in UL to enable timely and contextual feedback that will enhance the learning environment and support student learning in a way that is effective for staff also:

“we would be very aware say of the value of in context feedback for proactive learning outcomes and part of the challenge we have is to try and enable infrastructure that's conducive to it: peer feedback options say in the assignments tool, Big Blue Button options that give you polling and give you quizzes and give you other opportunities, using you know the post-in tool for personalized feedback. These are, and we know that there's a there's a, particularly now there's a huge requirement as [name]said, large classes are particularly problematic. So we feel a strong, I suppose responsibility, to try and enable structurally, some of these mechanisms that will allow for in context feedback in a way that doesn't break lecturers backs like that they actually can do this in a, in an efficient way. Or that they can disseminate it to TAs effectively. So there are an awful lot of infrastructure issues around that and enabling that is, I suppose, an ongoing challenge. But, but it's also, it's quite exciting as well because it's the heart of a lot of, I suppose well certainly as we'd see it, a lot of true learning comes via there to enhancing that relationship between the lecturer and students, particularly for the one to many and particularly for this online environment.”

A similar view was shared by a participant in the senior management group, highlighting the benefits of in-platform tools like polling on Sulis or Moodle, which gives real time information and feedback and most importantly, builds the identity of the student group:

“you know the polling also gives the, because it's visible to the class, that gives this class, a sense of identity. Well, I'm one of those that have done the [subject] before or not or, you know, or, I'm living at home or I'm on the campus or, you know, how many people are actually able to, you know, have good broadband? Those sorts of questions that people are being asked and it just that sort of polling technique is just a few seconds. That's all it takes for the students to fill it in. And everybody in the class module gets to see it and it's visible and it builds up a story. So that's interesting”

Support required to enhance use of data analytics

Participants identified a number of areas where more needs to be done if they are to engage more fully with learning analytics in the conduct of their roles. These included

- Skills and training in interpreting the data
- The need for clarity and guidelines governing the use of the data
- Access for staff in central services to engagement data

Details of the discussion and recommendations arising are captured under each heading below:

(i) *Skills and training in interpreting data*

A common view shared is that you don't know the potential of any of these tools until you've been trained on it:

"you never know like, what exactly you can do with a piece of software or tool until you've seen some form of training on it. Like you might use 10% of it, but, there's probably 90% there."

"I would like training, both from, you know, knowing what's out there, understanding the data like [name] was saying, and also maybe even things like best practice from other people to spot warning signs or things like that as well."

"I think we need training sessions and other ways to get that information out there to the course directors and administrators and ordinary staff members to, who will only make use of the data if they know how" (MFG)

"I think maybe we could do with general training on, you know, I guess we don't always think of some information as data so to be reminded of what data exist and and then how to how to treat them in a general sense, it might be a useful training course for everyone."

In the context of learning analytics, some participants flagged the need to be able to understand what the data is actually saying, being able to verify it and/or interpret it appropriately.

"I'm a little bit cynical about online stats. ... it's a bit around. You know, I can look at how many times, how many people are at my lecture? I get some engagement, so I kind of have a clue there's a bit of engagement going on there, that's not too bad. And I could look to how many people have looked at the recording, but then they could just turn it on and have it going in the corner of the sitting room and not be looking at it. So data for me just gives hints, it's around getting what's behind it all the time for me. Always."

"just to be able to take it [data] with a huge grain of salt and not have it used to judge things like promotions"

"That's so true. We've had so many people go like just blank on us and so you end the lecture and three hours later, someone's still in that meeting. And it's just someone who just went into the meeting and just open all day because they want to get the attendance mark or whatever."

"I suppose we are very aware too that, that it's just data, it only becomes effective information when we interpret it"

"Just because we have data doesn't really mean that we have the reasons underlying for it and and we cannot make really predictive relationships as such, with that data. Like we cannot, for example, assume that those that have spent the longest watching videos or performing other actions and they really are necessarily those that are going to perform best. And we know from research elsewhere actually that it's likely to be the opposite, that that those that perhaps that are sometimes not as active, still they're just more likely to be sailing through and its the students

that perhaps are struggling are those that are using. So it's just the, I think it requires really a lot of knowledge, background knowledge I suppose and baseline data to know how to treat that information and not to make assumptions"

Another believed training is critical to enhanced use of the potential of learning analytics

"We would say training is absolutely essential, as an enabler. And it's been one of the biggest challenges we've had. Infrastructure is second to us in terms of challenge in trying to enable faculty to engage, you know, especially faculty that are coming to it new and wouldn't have used those technologies before or wouldn't have seen either a need or an inclination to use them. So that's huge. And they are, you know, knowledge here is a real enabler. It does make a massive difference as to the quality, you can deliver to your students. So we would regard it as absolutely crucial."

(ii) *The need for clarity and policy or guidelines governing the use of the data*

There was a clear request from a number of participants, particularly those actively doing research using student data for there to be clear University policy and guidelines around what's permitted:

"there's no clear guidance from university about what we're allowed to use, what kind of data we're allowed to use, what we can do with this. So every time I want to do research project ...I'm left kind of on my own fumbling around going, I'll apply for ethics approval. ... We have all these great ideas about what we can do with student data, but when you actually want to use it for some, you know, pedagogical and research value, you're kind of on your own. ... if we're serious about doing analytics and if people are trying to do research about it, it would be very helpful if we had some kinda clear guidance on what's allowed and what isn't allowed."

In relation to such policy/guidelines it was argued that there are two aspects to it:

"There's two aspects of this. The university has, needs to inform students about what data has been collected. That's not up to me as an individual lecturer to to explain or apologize ... And then, if an individual researcher then says I want to use this particular data belonging to you, this is what I want to do with it and why, do you consent or not."

For staff in central services also, who have access to certain data, there was also a clear request for policy around access to data, both in terms of internal and external requests for information:

"The other thing is around policy, you know, I have access to quite a lot of data and sometimes I'm asked for things and I don't know if I should share them or not, you know. So it would be great to get guidelines around what we are allowed to share, what we're not allowed to share, what we're allowed to share externally because I get, you know, requests from the press you know as well. And it's not the published HEA returns necessarily that I am using as my data source, ... so there, there are definitely gray areas for me around what I can and can't share."

In the context of developing policies around how we approach learning analytics, data analytics and managing access etc, one participant brought attention to the JISC guidelines on same in the UK, suggesting it as a helpful way to guide UL thinking on this currently:

"JISC you probably are aware in the UK have a code of practice. And I think we're doing a lot of talking about policies and strategies, but we're probably not there yet. But even if we were to talk about coming up with a code of practice that was made up, you know, was seven or eight specific rules around responsibilities, stewardship of data, privacy, validity, access, this kind of thing, that would help us along the road to developing a strategy or a policy on this type of thing too. And I think it will be important for a group to make the distinction between what is institution level analytics, what is engagement analytics, and what is helpful towards learning analytics ahm you

know because they're all slightly nuanced different things and and I think just a code of practice and I can just pop a link into the chat if it's useful to this particular guide. But something around that, that people could have agreement on the important parts of of whatever we want to use our analytics for, would be very helpful starting point.

<https://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/code-of-practice-for-learning-analytics>

(iii) Access for staff in central services to engagement data

One argument was made that it is actually people in support services who perhaps most need access to student engagement data with services in order to be able to best address student needs on an ongoing basis:

In terms of support for example if if I have an individual consultation with a student, like you could you could get a clear picture of their level of engagement with either library services or other support services [using the data] ...and you could you could quickly deduce either potential resources to suggest pre- your consultation or post-consultation and that could affect you know how, it could affect how timely, the actual conversation goes as well."

"I think that's a really valid point. ... the services people are like, ye are the people who really hit the front line of the students, you know, much more than a lecturer in a big class"

Ethical concerns

Participants were asked if there are any ethical concerns they would have about incorporating learning analytics into their teaching practice. Concerns were identified under a number of clear heading as follows:

- Gender issues
- Purpose of Data Collection
- Need for policy

The actual concerns raised are itemised under each heading below

(i) Gender

A couple of participants identified specific concerns around data analytics and student feedback in terms of the known gender aspects, i.e., the existing research evidence that female academics/ lecturers/ tutors get less favourable feedback than men. The use of Module surveys in academic promotions was of particular concern in this regard

"I would have two concerns, one is ... around gender. Absolutely recognized internationally now that women are slated, even by other women. It's not just by men it's by women. So female academics get much lower marks than men. And that is a big concern because from our careers point of view, we actually use those again towards our promotions and and portfolios and everything. So that's a big concern. ... there is a repercussion to me getting bad marks, just because I'm a woman."

"I hate saying this, but I have to. The research evidence also suggests that there is a very gendered attitudes in terms of students evaluation of teaching and that male tutors, lecturers will automatically get better scores... Males will get better, potentially better SET scores than female teachers or leaders, so the [facilities] mightn't come up as a problem across [all/different cohorts] depending on who the tutor or leader is"

(ii) Purpose

The purpose of the data collection was raised again under the issue of ethics. Some saw that University should be a place where students can start with a clean slate and not be overly surveilled:

"why do you really need to know what what the academic performance of a particular student was before they got to university doesn't he have, she have the right to start with a with a blank slate?"

"And it's like a subject and they just don't like that one subject, should that be, should you then be honing in like we're going to really drill you on this one?"

A related concern was around transparency in terms of who is accessing the data collected and how they're using that data:

"And the second one [concern] is back to the original point as well around transparency. Who's getting the data? So if my data is collected from my class, who's actually seeing that and are they interpreting it differently than I will interpret it and that is really important as well."

(iii) Need for policy/guidelines

Participants clearly indicated a need for policy around the collection, use and interpretation of data. This was seen as important both for students to know and understand what data was being collected and why/how it will be used and also for staff in the organisation to understand what data is being analysed and for what purposes.

“there needs to be a structure around it that the students understand what data that they are giving over and how it may be used”

“the [University] executive more and more are interested in the use of tools, so for capacity planning and all that sort of stuff. So there is more focus on data from those points of view. And they are beginning to look and I think there's a struggle here, they are beginning to look at how do you equate performance and I don't particularly mean lecturer performance, but the university's performance in a more holistic way. So those have been some of the challenges ... how do you measure those and and they're quite, they're quite difficult. So I think policy is really, you know, more evolved policy here. And I think the evolution of culture around how we manage and how we interpret and disseminate data. But I think we need all be under no illusion that we do collect data and we will be collecting it more of it as time goes on.”

Such a policy needs to clearly indicate whom data can be shared with

“I think there has to be kind of a very clear guidelines on who that data should be to shared with”

And there needs to be clarity on the consent obtained from students around collection of data

“And I think we mentioned it already, but consent as well, just making sure that the students or whoever we're getting data from, but if it's learning analytics I guess from students, that they're aware of the data are being gathered” ...“I think on that point, it might help us all to work out what we could do with data and the University to work out why its being gathered if if we did have more explicit statements about what students are consenting to”

Intervention and the obligation to act

Participants were asked whether they believed there is an obligation to act if the data available identifies a student at risk. There was a spread of responses.

Some participants felt that the intention about whether and how to act needed to be determined up front and the data collected on the basis of what you intended to do with it, rather than acquiring data and then wondering what to do with it

“one issue that anecdotally popped up quite a bit this year is like the increased workload of that's been placed on students in the online environment and that's leading to students engaging with like recorded materials or lectures longer than they probably should be. ...Like, you have to look at it. How are you going to use this?”

“I suppose it would be important to base what you're collecting on where does the college feel that action requires to be taken as opposed to having reams and reams of data, but nobody with the time to go through it or no kind of action on it”

While a majority of respondents supported intervention, one concern was raised about whether being overly interventionist actually disempowers the student:

“students are adults also and we're we're kind of taking a lot of the power away from the students here. And I think there's something about that. And we're talking about co-construction and mutual responsibility and empowerment just I have a question over that as well.”

Of those who did favour intervention, not all perceived that there was an obligation to act per se, but that in principle it was a good thing and in practice it is generally what is done in UL:

“There probably isn't an obligation but I think Students do appreciate it when we do act ... And very often, it works, sometimes it doesn't. But very often, it does.”

“I think we're pretty hands on with students in UL. It's my experience that we do tend to kind of take an interest, but I don't think it's an obligation. But I also don't think it's wrong to do.”

Others suggested that it would be remiss to have the data and not respond to it if a student is at risk:

“if you're if you're identifying and using things to identify at risk students and you feel you can rely on the data I think it will be a bit remiss to to ignore that, you know, ... particularly early on, you know, in a semester, early on in a person's life cycle in the in the university”

“I think so, yeah, yeah, yeah. Because you have the information. ... And they just need that personal connection or that one to one, ‘we, we know, we can see you’, not in the Big Brother way, but we , we acknowledge you and we're here to help.” (MFG)

Another felt strongly that interventions should only be made in the context of concern for a student's wellbeing rather than their academic performance:

“And I think that there's only an obligation, if the students well being, is in question and rather than I feel quite strongly that their academic achievement is something they should be managing their selves themselves. And I don't really think they need another prompt I think it plays into problems about productivity and workload ... if we have someone saying ‘Oh, you're you know your your your QCA is falling by .05’ or something like that. I think it's much more likely to be helpful if it's something exactly as you as you were saying you're logged in this amount of time or we see your zoom meetings X amount of time, make sure to go outside once a day or something like that. I just think that's better. I think we don't need to be driving overwork anymore than we already are.”

Who is best placed to act

Participants were also asked, who is best placed to act if a student is identified as being at risk. Here too there was a spectrum of responses, some indicating the need for such interventions to be in-person and others seeing the potential of automated, system flags and automated contact with students. These are presented separately below incorporating the perceived pros and cons of each.

(i) In person responses – pros and cons

The observation was made that if one is genuinely concerned for a student's wellbeing, then contact probably is best coming from a person rather than a system alert:

"I think that there's if there's an obligation to act on behalf of like a genuine concern for well being, ... I think that should probably come from a person rather than a system like their tutor, their academic tutor or advisor."

In terms of who should hold an obligation to act, different suggestions were made, one view amongst senior management being that it was dependent on the situation:

"I think it depends where the problem is. I mean, if, if it's a student having difficulty with one module then the module leader is the obvious person. But where we see a pattern of a student who is really struggling, we would normally refer that to the to the academic advisor, the student's personal, academic advisor."

Overall, responses around who should act fell into one of three categories: personal advisor, module leader or First Year Student Coordinator.

Personal advisor:

"every student is assigned a personal advisor. And I think that that is their lasting connection so they could have five lecturers in their program, Each teaching a different module, so, you, you may not see the signals if you're just a module leader, it may be the personal advisor"

Module leader:

"You might have a module leader, you might have a tutor, you might have support services, you know. ... I think what we need is a kind of coordinated approach, in some ways. And even, even at that, come back to the program level, it probably needs a coordinated approach even if that's of a course director, if that's a teaching team whatever you want to call it..."

"I would do it at the module level so at the module coordinator level,"

"If it's on your particular module if a student is struggling, yeah, I think the module leader has to intervene. ... I'm talking about the very large groups where you really have to rely on those analytics, because there's no other way of knowing what's going on" (Gp4)

First Year Student Coordinator

One participant in a different group felt that it's impossible to intervene directly if one is teaching very large groups and that the best course of action is to leave that activity with the First Year Student Coordinator:

"So we have very large groups. And so it's not really possible for one person to do this so that's why we we pass We kind of, we try and identify the students and then we just pass on the names to to the first your coordinator. And I think that works quite well because I think the students engage with first your coordinator, because you don't see her as you know she's, she's outside of

the system. She's outside of the lecturing the lecturers. And so yeah, so so, they tend to respond to her"

One concern was raised about the capacity of staff in the system to be available to students if they're being flagged somehow as being at risk:

"that whole area [role of student advisors], I think, is being under review. And also, given that there's a focus to extend the numbers of students in the university. You have to think about how many advice. how many students per advisor, different departments have different mechanisms for upgrading that system"

Another also flagged this concern in a different group and perceived that over time there may need to be a whole new category of staff who would manage this data and interpret it:

"I can't really see the module coordinator being completely responsible to oversee 100 people in his module, you know with all the data coming through. So it probably needs to be filtered to someone within the department. And I suppose the universities are supposed to get more more blended in the next 10 years and there probably needs to be roles set up within the university where that data can go, you know, and maybe they can they can flag with the module coordinators that there's, they can probably see trends like if they're not interacting with one module they're probably not interacting with the rest of the modules, you know, ahm so I think sort of filtering the data, making everything just more streamlined"

(ii) *Automated or system based responses to at risk students at risk*

The view was shared that the infrastructure is evolving all the time with possibility of collecting, correlating and creating system flags

"as systems evolve, you are having early warning systems within those systems where certain data is collected and collated and can disseminate notification."

Another participant saw similar potential going forward, that the systems can support the University in building scale and enhancing its responsiveness:

"I suppose what you get with a system is the, the, the ability to scale these supports and in a way that we may not have the ability to do at the moment"

In this context, it was seen that with the appropriate infrastructure in place for creating system flag, the best was forward was for the student to be first person who should have a flag raised to them and have the opportunity to decide whether or not they wanted to engage with any supports potentially available to them:

"maybe it should be flagged to the student first, in the sense look kind of all your survey or your academic performance seems to indicate you're not doing well, you're not happy here. These are the people you can talk to. Do you want to? ... This is is first and foremost again kind of flipping the script and putting the students in a position to give them a choice. Do they want to do something about that or not?"

In one group, an example of a specific early warning system in a HEI was shared in the chat: "The Purdue system of early warning <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.1145/2330601.2330666>"

In another group, a participant shared the view that there is value in one-to-one contact with a student compared to an automated response. However, acknowledging resource capacities in being able to contact students individually, one-to-one on large cohorts, it was felt if there was an opt in

system, it would highlight students to the kinds of data that are being collected and by implication preparing them for automated flags:

“For some reason I would be perhaps especially concerned about the automatic automating automated systems. And I would like to think I think there's a value on the human one to one follow up, but obviously there's capacity issues in that in that is doable with a small cohort, but it's absolutely impossible because of resource, resource constraints in large cohorts, so probably an opt in system would kind of generate that level of awareness on the students on starting learning how much is canvassed on there, how much data is harvested.”

Recommendation:

It was suggested that there is a need for a coordinated, coherent approach to supporting students, including determining what data needs to be collected and who is responsible for taking action on it.

“a fairly coherent, across the board, targeted program on how do we deal with at risk students and where is it the support services, how much is expected of a course, director, how much is expected of a module leader? I mean, those are the basic questions that will ensure action is taken or not, as opposed to having a huge amount of data, but nobody responsible for actioning it. ... I suppose being very clear on if they're, if we're taking data, it is for action. And what is that action and who's responsible for it has to be kind of how this whole thing is driven.”

Opt out from supports

The issue of opt out was also put to some groups when the opportunity arose, in terms of whether students should have the option to opt out of being contacted if deemed, e.g. to be at risk.

One participant suggested that the approach should be to opt in, rather than to opt out

“I suppose kind of an opt in kind of clause would be a good point to start in terms of raising awareness and and what information comes back to the students as opposed to kind of very important to, not to come from a deficiency model where if information comes back to the students it may be done in a way that is perceived as highlighting problems, but rather to be kind of positive and constructive and probably the opt in element would be important to raise awareness and to treat people as adults in principle.”

One participant felt that the option of opt out should always be available to people:

“Yes, I think so. I think everybody should have an option right, that's probably even the law, right, I don't know?”

At the same time, it was suggested that if people are opting out, it would be good to know if that arises from a concern about how the data is being collected, used and stored, around which some assurances could be given:

“It'd be interesting to hear what's behind that, though, ... is there a fear around, you know well they're going to see that you know that i was on these contact lists or whatever,...is that what's behind it, or is it, could that be managed nicely with better communication on around the data retention and around the confidentiality of it.”

Analysis

Initial responses to definitions and data capture points

The definitions provided to the focus group participants were not broadly agreed and suggest the need to develop an agreed, shared understanding of what is meant by data analytics and learning analytics at the University of Limerick and what is meant by terms such as student success.

There was a lack of clarity as to what the university is trying to do with the data it is collecting, ie. what issues are the organisation seeking to address? This suggests an ongoing need to clarify what the University is trying to address and what data it requires to inform how to address those issues, rather than starting from the data that is available inherently in various tools being used and wondering what to do with it or how to exploit it.

Clarity around what the organisation is seeking to address would also ensure that the correct data is being sought and captured by the most relevant or appropriate medium. The use of surveys and learning analytics data were both questioned as to whether the right information is being sought and captured. On a related note, it was perceived that there was a significant gap in the data sources in the poll which left out the polling techniques and feedback options available on platforms like Sulis.

Suggestions for a broader focus on data being captured included data on student motivation, social and emotional learning, and student contentment.

Legitimate purposes for use of data (Purpose)

Unprompted, staff identified potential for the use of data analytics in terms of supporting students in the context of retention and progression; predicting student success factors; identifying students at risk, especially in large groups; and to enhance decision making generally.

Based on the poll, participants indicated that they perceived legitimate use of learning analytics in relation to all the areas identified and, in the ensuing discussions, provided evidence of using data in all anticipated areas including:

- Improving service quality
- Improving the educational experience in a course/programme
- Improving individual students' educational experience
- To inform one's teaching practice and
- To inform one's research practice

In these contexts, participants identified a number of concerns and issues arising from their engagement with the data up until now. A number of difficulties were identified around accessing data in real time and usable format and whether the data was sufficient or indeed of the right kind. Concerns were expressed around student consent and levels of student awareness of the volume and detail of data being collected and stored. Frustration was expressed regarding surveys generally, and in particular in terms of perceived lack of follow up on issues identified (e.g with regard to complaints about facilities) and difficulties with analysis and comparison of data across the various surveys. Frustration was also expressed at the difficulties in being able to compare and access data on individual cohorts on joint modules, the absence of which currently seems to render the data provided pretty much ineffective. The validity of engagement data was also questioned. Concerns were expressed about the gender implications of collecting student feedback via surveys with the known negative impact on female teaching staff. And finally concerns were raised in relation to ethical issues pertaining to the use of the data captured, in particular in terms of whether

and how academics can use such data in their own research. All of these concerns led to a clear expression of the need for policy around the collection and use of data, the need for training for academic staff to best enable their engagement with the data and concern for staff workloads in the context of analysing the burgeoning amount of data now available to them and to which they don't necessarily feel competent to respond.

Data currently being used and gaps or needs identified (Teaching Needs)

Typically, participants were comfortable with having data available to them in relation to academic data, engagement data and progression. The main type of data around which concerns were raised was in relation to personal data, including accessing of pastoral services.

Participants named quite a wide range of sources of data that they routinely use that were not specifically mentioned in the poll. Typically these sources would be included under the broad banner of 'engagement data' which was included in the poll. The specific sources highlighted were identified here to demonstrate the range and volume of platforms currently being used in this regard, e.g., Sulis, Panopto, Microsoft Teams, Google Surveys, You Tube, Publisher. The student record system, SI, was also highlighted as a source of pertinent data.

When asked what would be useful to staff to enable them to use data more, including for their own professional development, participants made multiple suggestions including, e.g. enhancing ease of access to and interpretation of data; substantively improving the reliability of the data that is stored centrally; centralised approach and professional support for data analysis, taking a programme level approach to analysis of the data in terms of student progress, and a return to basics in terms of clearly defining the purposes for which the data is to be used.

Feedback from Students

Participants were asked about the feedback they get from students and what were the most effective ways for them to get feedback on their module or programme. A broad range of surveys were identified as being routinely used, including ISSE, Module Surveys, Student Evaluation of Teaching and In-platform polling tools respectively.

The current approach to data capture via surveys came up for criticism, based on the following: role and purpose of surveys is perceived to be unclear; that there is an unmet requirement for more personal and qualitative feedback; concerns regarding the reliability of the survey data collected; the use of survey data in academic promotions and survey fatigue, leading to poor response levels.

The inadequacy of the MSS survey in particular is leading to academic staff generating their own surveys to endeavour to get the feedback they actually need, contributing also to the survey fatigue dilemma. It begs the question whether the MSS is defunct, with multiple staff saying they only use it because it is required for promotions.

One of the anticipated outcomes of this initiative is the development of an institution wide Student Evaluation Policy central to which will be associated procedures for closing the feedback loop. The findings in the focus groups suggest that the current centralised surveys negatively impact the feedback loop as a result of e.g.,

- the inadequacy of the questions answered
- poor timeliness of the surveys being conducted
- the delay in reporting the results
- lack or limitation on qualitative feedback to explain the feedback
- lack of local level detail on surveys

These issues would need to be addressed in the Student Evaluation Policy.

When asked specifically whether there should be an opportunity for students to opt-out of surveys, an unanticipated response was that students currently **can** opt out of module surveys, which seemed to surprise participants also. Overall there was no definitive support for opt out although it was suggested that there is a need for an overall communications strategy which would cover the role and purpose of surveys and clarify issues like opt out.

Participants identified multiple ways in which academic staff in particular currently seek and action feedback from students in more formative and timely ways:

- Engaging with students directly in classes or at end of class to inquire how the module is going
- Taking anonymised feedback via post-its at the end of a lecture and posting everything for discussion, addressing issues immediately
- Academic staff designing their own more qualitative surveys to get the feedback they require at module level, responding to issues within the same week and certainly within the same module
- Using platforms like Sulis to get immediate feedback e.g, an assessment approach, to discuss workload, to get insights on a teaching approach

These were seen as more effective largely due to the qualitative nature of the feedback achieved, their timeliness, being formative in nature and with more likelihood of quickly closing the feedback loop.

Participants identified a number of options for enhancing the approach to surveys and overcoming survey fatigue, including the need for policy and clarity of purpose, enhanced coordination of surveys, working with in-house expertise to enhance the approach to student feedback, including the role of surveys and exploiting existing platforms to capture student feedback.

There was an express need identified for the kind of Student Evaluation Policy intended from this project as well as an acknowledgment of the in-house expertise that exists in the academic community in UL which should be harnessed to support the development of same.

There were also some perceived opportunities identified in terms of centralising much of the data contained in surveys to enable comparison across data sets and recommendation of a schedule of surveys including those collecting data for external purposes so that everyone is aware of the timings and can work with them to avoid over surveying at peak times.

One suggestion to enhance things going forward was that it would be helpful to have a communications strategy in terms of how the University communicates with students, within which the approach to surveys could be incorporated.

Support required to use data analytics more

In terms of enhancing engagement with and use of data analytics, participants highlighted the need for training and support for interpreting the data, including professional support from dedicated staff in central services.

The need for clarity and policy around the use of data was emphasised with a recommendation that the University could base its approach on the JISC code of practice for learning analytics. And there was a request that staff in central services, who support students, would be enabled to have access

to individual student engagement data in order to best address and support individual student needs.

Ethical Concerns

When specifically asked about ethical issues arising from incorporating learning analytics into their teaching practice, participants raised concerns around gender issues with student feedback and the research evidence which indicates that female teaching staff are routinely given less favourable feedback than males; concerns around the purpose of the data collected and who has access to such data and the overall need for policy and guidelines governing the collection, use and interpretation of data. These issues can all be addressed in the intended Learning Analytics Policy and Student Evaluation Policy.

Intervention and Obligation to Act

While there were differences of opinion as to whether there is an actual obligation to act in support of students identified as being 'at risk' there was a broad consensus that it is the right thing to do and is actually something that UL does well. There was also a range of responses in terms of who is best placed to take action, ranging from module coordinators, to personal advisors to team (programme-level) interventions at the local level or involving the First Year Student Coordinator, in particular for very large cohorts.

There was a general perception that in-person responses are probably best, particularly if students are identified as being 'at risk' but there was also a perception that system-based flags are improving all the time and have potential in the longer term. This may become more important if anticipated concerns around staff capacity to respond to all the data and potential needs identified are realised. There was also a suggestion that there is a need for a coordinated, coherent approach to supporting students, including determining what data needs to be collected and who is responsible for taking action on same.

Facilitator Observations

Many of the concerns expressed around capture and use of data can be addressed by an appropriate Learning Analytics Policy which would need to cover, e.g.

- Clarification of the University's purpose regarding collection, use and interpretation of data
- clear definitions of what constitutes, e.g. institution level analytics, what is engagement analytics, and what is helpful towards learning analytics
- agreed definitions and understanding of what is meant by 'student retention', 'student success', 'student progression' in order that they can be measured
- Informed consent from students regarding use of their data
- Clear governance procedures around collection, storage, use, access and interpretation of data
- Identifying what data must be anonymised and/or the data that requires additional informed consent from students
- Clarity regarding whom data can be shared with and in what circumstances
- Clarity on the circumstances in which academic staff can use data for their own research and the circumstances in which additional ethical approval for such research is required and/or the circumstances in which additional engagement with students is required to verify their consent
- what data is being collected and used as indicators for e.g. identifying at risk students

- the need for baseline data to support identification of e.g. at risk students and success indicators/predictive data respectively in different disciplines
- Clearly identifying who is responsible for collecting, analysing and taking action on the data generated and/or addressing issues identified

The need for a Student Evaluation policy was essentially endorsed. Based on discussions in the focus groups, the core elements of such a policy would need to include or address:

- the role and purpose of feedback and how data is to be obtained
- the role and purpose of respective surveys
- recognise that there is no one-size fits all approach to enabling feedback and enable customisation of approaches, including customisation of surveys to the local level as necessary
- overcome the following issues with existing approaches to surveys: the inadequacy of the questions answered; poor timeliness of the surveys being conducted; the delay in reporting the results; lack or limitation on qualitative feedback to explain the feedback; lack of local level detail on surveys
- articulate the University's areas of focus and commitment to follow up on issues identified
- specify the circumstances in which stakeholders have opportunity to provide feedback and how to enable opt-in/out
- be attentive to the implicit messages given in the surveys deployed, e.g. students as consumers or as co-creators of their learning experience.
- address the gender concerns identified in research relating to student feedback and remove this issue as a concern in academic promotions, including using alternatives to MSS as evidence of responsiveness to students in promotions.
- exploit opportunities to centralise much of the data contained in surveys to enable comparison across data sets and
- create a schedule of surveys including those collecting data for external purposes so that everyone is aware of the timings and can work with them to avoid over surveying at peak times.

It is suggested that positive examples of successful interventions to support students identified as being at risk during academic year 202-21, based on learning analytics and a programmatic approach could be used as case studies and shared with others. It is further suggested that sharing how such interventions, using engagement analytics, are simply using the data to support outreach that was always previously undertaken – this is not a new approach and may give some assurances as to the intent and the positive impact of learning analytics data.

The idea of creating communities of practice to explore the potential of learning analytics and share good practices in terms of application of same was encouraged and participants gave some examples of how this is happening currently. This could be strengthened and supported centrally to empower teaching staff in relation to the use and application of learning analytics.

Challenges around storage of data and comparability of data sets, the accuracy of the data and reports produced all need to be addressed as a matter of urgency, both to enhance staff perceptions of the reliability of the data and to actually enable staff to do their work more easily, whether it is to interpret data to enable closing of the feedback loop or to provide data for Athena Swan Applications and accreditation.

Participants acknowledged the need for training and requested centralised support for interpreting data, both of which are suggested as important requirements to empower staff to use the data more comprehensively.

Participants provided multiple examples of alternative feedback approaches that are perceived as better than surveys and enhance closure of the feedback loop in more effective and timely ways. It could be argued therefore that a more holistic Student Evaluation Policy would articulate and legitimise such approaches to student feedback, including incorporating these alternative feedback models and their application as evidence for academic promotions purposes.

Appendix 1 – Poll Questions

1. Use of Data Analytics

What do you think are legitimate purposes for the use of data analytics (Multiple Choice)

- to improve the university's service quality, such as resource allocation, teaching quality, curriculum design, etc.?
- to improve the educational experience in a course/programme (e.g., identifying problems within a learning activity)?
- to improve an individual student's educational experience, e.g., identifying points of difficulty or points of disengagement?
- to inform you about your teaching practice?
- To inform your research practice

2. What kinds of data would be particularly useful to you in improving students' educational experience in a course/ programme that you are responsible for? (Multiple Choice)

- Academic data (e.g., assessments, educational history prior or during university)
- Engagement data (e.g, log-ins, clicks, library visits, video watching activities, attendance, forum discussions)
- Student Personal data (e.g., background data, sensitive data)
- Progression/Retention Data
- MSS survey responses
- Exit survey responses
- SET responses
- National student survey (studentsurvey.ie/ISSE)
- Student attendance/engagement with learning centres
- Student attendance/engagement with pastoral services