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Keywords
Student voice, reflections, evaluation, learning experience
INTRODUCTION

Overview:
The Student Discussion Forum is a framework of activities to enhance student engagement in discussions and reflections on their learning experience at Ulster. This pilot aimed to assess the viability and usefulness of such an approach in promoting authentic routes of communication for student views.

Description:
Ensuring all our students are included and considered is fundamental to the creation of equitable learning environments. While there are many established routes through which students can voice their reflections of their learning - self/module evaluations, SSCC, Student Representatives, UUSU, NSS etc., this project arose as a direct result of students approaching a member of staff with a range of comments, queries and reactions that they felt uneasy about making through established routes.

Establishing a safe, respectful and anonymized place in which students feel confident to articulate their experiences is essential. Transparency of the aims and structures of the forum and the facilitators role were distributed to all students. Involvement in the process was completely voluntary. Students could attend the forum meeting on campus and/or engage with the facilitator via email if they felt more comfortable doing this.

Design:
This project uses participatory evaluation as a means to empower all the participants and fully engage them in the process (Cousins and Chouinard, 2012). A series of activities were planned to allow students the opportunity to articulate, discuss and present their experiences and questions. These activities included individual and small group tasks as well as large group discussion (see Appendix A). Not to disrupt scheduled classes the forum met on a Wednesday afternoon.

Following the forum meeting the results of all the tasks where collated by the facilitator and presented to the entire cohort as an infographic (shown to the right) via email. The students where then invited to respond if they felt anything was not clearly represented, missing or any additional points of interest needed to be added. The revised infographic was then recirculated to the group again for confirmation of content.

The responses where then to be presented at the next Staff Student Consultative Committee meeting and Course Committee for action and response.
RESULTS

Findings:
The forum meeting allowed students to raise concerns and queries in a safe environment. There was an extremely high engagement rate in the process (n = 90 students responded, 86% of entire cohort of 105 students). The structured content of the forum meeting and clear establishment of the discussion parameters was extremely important.

The student engagement and reflective commentary on their learning experience was both forthcoming and extremely honest. Student discussion groups commenting on their learning experience on social media platforms are common place. This approach aims to engage students in a cohesive, inclusive and productive manner ensuring an authentic representation of their learning experience. This pilot confirmed that students are willing to engage in open discussions about their learning experiences in HE.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

References:
McNaught, A., Making invisible learners visible in research, UK, JISC
Acknowledgements:
I would like to thank the student cohort 2016/17 for their openness and willingness to engage in the process.

Attachments List:
Appendix A – PPP detailing structure of forum meeting and activities