Learning & Teaching @ Newcastle Podcast
Student Voice and Student Voice Survey Special

Hello and welcome to Episode 16 of the Learning and Teaching at Newcastle University podcast. I'm Holly Wheeler. And I'll be your guest host for this week. In this episode, we are going to focus on the topic of student voice and the student voice surveys. Listening to our students is vital for improving the learning experience here at Newcastle University. Over the next 30 minutes or so, we're going to dig deeper into how we listen to the student voice. In the first part we hear from Gilly Box. Gilly is an educational governance officer in the Educational Policy and Governance Team in LTDS. Gilly will be talking us through student voice surveys.

Firstly, we asked Gilly what is a student voice survey what are the different student voice surveys.

So. Student voice surveys are a method by which we gather student opinion and student's feedback on their experience. There are lots of different surveys that we run. Some are national surveys that are run out with the university so that are run on a national basis and that we just run in the university here and similar ones that we just run ourselves. So in terms of the national surveys, there are three national surveys that we take part in. The one that most people have heard of is the National Student Survey or the NSS. That's an annual survey of final year undergraduates. And we also run to survey school, the PTES and the PRES or PRES and their postgraduate taught and post-graduate research experience surveys. And those are surveys of PGT and PGR students. So again, annually of each of those groups of students, we also have internal institutional surveys that we run things and on stage evaluations. So they run at the end of each stage. And those asked students about those specific, specific module that they've taken in that semester and that experience in particular, whereas the national surveys tend to focus more on the overall experience of the student.

As a student how would I complete one and why would I completed?

So usually with most of the surveys, you'll receive an invitation to take part by email. So for the for the national surveys, you'll be if you're in one of the eligible groups or if you're in on the undergraduate or your PGT or PGR student. When the survey is live, you'll be sent an email with a link that you can just click on and that'll take you straight into the survey. For the stage evaluations. You will be sent a link by email. But you can also find them in canvas when you log in. There's a section that says my surveys and you can go in there and access any surveys of yours that are open. When or at

what points in the year are they open? The NSS runs every year from usually end of January or early February and open until the end of April. So it's quite a long window. The PTES runs from April to June ish. Again, the dates vary slightly each year and the PRES runs usually around March to May. Stage evaluations run at the end of each semester. So they open sometime, usually in December at the end of semester one and then open usually around May for semester two. Each individual school will choose their own dates within a sort of fixed window, so it will vary slightly between schools. But usually you'll get them around December and then around May.

Why are they important to students?

Well, it's a good question. Why are they important? I think really the intention of the survey, so the university has a mission to make sure that all the students at Newcastle University have a really outstanding learning experience. And obviously, there are lots of informal ways that you can share feedback. You can talk to your lecturers your tutor your supervisor. But actually what the surveys offers is a more formal opportunity to share your ideas and your thoughts, to tell us what's going well, what you like about your course, what you like about the experience of being here at the university and what's not going so well. And what you'd like to see changed. In some cases that will be a change that you will actually experience. So with stage evaluations, if you make comments about your course or about how things are going, it could be that things can be actually adjusted to suit you and to be better going forward. In the case the national surveys, it's often about looking back on your whole experience and seeing what's gone well and what hasn't gone so well, so that you can so that we can make changes that suit the whole university and that make sure that the learning experience that we're offering to students is the best it can be. And I can say with some confidence, I mean, I've worked in student voice at this university for a long time, for a number of years. There's a lot of action goes on in response to student opinion and student voice activity. So the survey results are really a really well studied and there's lots of analysis of those happens and lots of changes do happen both at school level and at the institutional level. In response to student feedback, you know, the university does really care what students think about their experience and does want to make sure that the experience is the best it can be. So it's just it's great if students take the opportunity to spend a few minutes filling out the surveys and telling us what's going well and what they'd like to see improved.

Why are they important to the university and learning and teaching?

I mean, as I've already said, I think the university wants to make sure that everybody has the best possible learning experience. And we want to make sure that our courses are of the highest quality and that students are

having a really positive experience here at the university here at Newcastle. And really, it's important that we know how students feel in order to do that. I mean, we can we can see how students are doing. We can look at the results. We can see how many people are signing up for our courses. We've got sort of data that relates to that. But actually knowing what students feel and how they found their degree and what they've enjoyed and what's been really positive. And also knowing what they're not enjoying is really important in order to allow us to make those changes and sometimes is about not knowing what's not going as well, because that gives us the opportunity to look at what's not happening so well and why and do something about it. And I think for the university to continually improve, which is what we want to do, we do need to know. How students are finding it and what's working and what isn't working.

Thank you Gilly for that great overview of student voice surveys and how they influence cell learning, teaching and culture here at in this state. Now we can catch up with three students. Mack Marshall, a student rep for Geography politics and sociology, Orla Thomas, a student, a history, classics and archaeology. And finally, one of our post graduate students, Joseph Caddick, a former student rep in his under grad. We ask all three students, the same three questions why the student voice is so important. How are they actively involved in getting their voice and those voices heard? And finally, what advice would they give to someone who wants to get involved?

Here's Mack.

Student voice I think is important students. Because it's I mean, at the very end of the day, you're paying for education. You're actively and should actively be involved in your education. And the ways in which you can shape it through student voice is so important. And I think that's whether that's through a mid module review feedback or whether that's trying to lecturers about what went well in a specific seminar or what well in a lecture or whether it's sitting on big meetings, which I have the pleasure of doing and expressing student voice that way is so important for students because as I said, it's your education. If you want to change and if something's working, well, then we should work towards making it better. And if something isn't going well and equally, how can we how can we remedy that? And that's important as well. Right now, I in the context, I mean specifically last year, but also this year as well as we're still a blended and we're still not back to quote-unquote normal. Is that feedback and that student voice is so important when things are a little bit skewed, when we're doing different types of zoom lectures or we're doing more things on campus. Students need to be able to express what's going well for them and what's not going well. And I think student voice is always centred around negative things that it's not be working for me or this isn't this isn't good enough.

But actually, student voice is also about positive things, about things that are going well within your education and you can shape the positive things as well. So things like last year, I expressed how well online office hours were, for example, about how useful they were for students and things I'd not have continued this year. And that's all part of you having an impact on your education experience. But I also think student voice is important for colleagues and for staff in the way, that they need to know what's going what's going well and what's not going well. And they can only improve their teaching and their learning opportunities if they're aware of what's going on. So in the same way, as I said before mid-module review or a comment at the end of a seminar, they can then improve it for the next seminar or for the next year or the next course, whatever and that passes down through generations. And the whole thing about universities is collective, holistic, improving research, all of those big buzz words. Student voice is a massive factor in that, I think. Yeah. So it's important for students. It's important for staff. It's important for developing education and teaching methods on the whole, I suppose. So on a personal level, if I was just going to be Mack as a student, then I'm chatting to lecturers after a seminar I'm mentioning and I'm filling out the mid module review, feedback forms or all of that sort stuff out doing student surveys at the end of the year. That's the sort of thing that I would do typically. But this year, as school rep for geography politics and sociology. I've taken student voice to a slightly more elevated level, so I look at student voice, the student voice committees student school committees. So speaking to calls reps and seeing how what's going well, what's working on their courses and then explaining that to a more senior academic staff. I take their concerns through social media as well now. So I mean people feel free to email me as well, but also my school rep Instagram account. I have people message me through that and I always try and communicate what's going on in terms of student voice. So I find sometimes there's a bit of a miscommunication or students don't actually know what's going on when they when they express something. And there's a possibly a feeling and this might come from when you're a high school where if you mentioned something, nothing actually changes. But there's such a difference at university, because it's your education and you're actively involved in it. And a lot of staff consider you colleagues. So when you mentioned something, things tend to change and that's brilliant and that's amazing. Students need to be aware of that. So through my Instagram, I often if someone mentions something or if I raise an issue about, I don't know a module or about methods of teaching or well-being or PECs, then I often try and update and say, look, this is what you brought up and this is, well, what's happened since you got through raising these issues, both myself and three other students through School forums. So I meet with the chairs of few different politics, geography, sociology and politics and economics and speak to those students to see what their feedback is. I then follow that up at a faculty level. I speak to my fellow school reps across humanities and social sciences. I sit on the School Education

Committee, which is far more focussed on just the school. I sit on the Education Executive Committee, which is aligned with Sabbatical Officers at the Union, and we talk more broadly about education there and how you the union can help and everything from working out where to do zoom study calls on campus to broader issues with teaching and learning and lectures and all that, all that jazz. And then also I represent something. I represent students almost nearly every level, which is such an honour and really useful, but representing humanities social sciences at the University Education Committee. So a slightly more broader topics of like shaping the academic year and more broader learning and teaching things. So these topics and the feedback that I engage in can be everything from something not necessarily minor, because no part feedback is minor in my opinion. But we talk our well-being about PEC, about access to things on canvas, to the shape of academic year, to what's working well on canvas, what's not working well, shouldn't learning community events the whole picture and knocks every different level and making sure students are aware that feedback is being heard through me as best we can, but also from staff as well? I think and I mentioned this before about it often seems that the only time you can give feedback is when something's going wrong. And that's not necessarily the case is feedback's great when whether it's good or bad feedback and on a local level. I think going to a local like student voice committee, or your student school committee, whatever that is. Speaking to your calls, reps speaking to somebody like me who was a school rep, always really great, avenues to go through to express feedback and even speaking to lecturers when they ask for feedback like informally is important. Even when they don't ask for feedback, give feedback. If you just even just say, well, that was a really useful seminar or actually there was too many readings this week and there was too much me. Informally feedback is useful. I'd say even if issues are slightly larger being aware that your sabbatical officers exist is important. And then all of the surveys that are available your NSS surveys like mid module reviews, things like that, which they take five minutes. They don't take a long time. And it's important that as students, whether you have problems or whether you don't. Or whether you just want to say, actually, this lecture was brilliant or this this is going really well for me at university. I could access this, filling them out are useful. And it's not just for whether it's your final year or not or whether your whether you think it's gonna affect or not. The is that it will impact teaching this year, next year, whatever way you express feedback is going to make a difference. And feedback is genuinely from my perspective, from the ways that which I interact with the faculty and the university. You can see the feedback is so important to them. And I mean, for example, what you shape the academic year essentially. You shape your academic experience to express feedback and ask whether it's a small meeting or whether that's through informally speaking to somebody, whether it's doing a survey, your shaping your experience. So I could encourage filling out things every survey you get given, although not too much. But I always think back to

last year when everything was online and it was still a bit overwhelming. And I attended to my first student committee meeting and I mentioned something that wasn't consistent in all of my modules. And by the end of the day, they fixed it to me. That showed the feedback is valued at this university and on all courses. It just necessarily means that you need to speak out about it and just talk about it. And that's important.

Now let's hear from Orla.

Well, I think a student voice is like super important because students are like in effect, we're investing in the university experience. It kind of seems only right that we should have a say in sort of how things happen and how it runs. And I think of the idea of having a student representation and people like me and Mack and the jobs that we do. And students maybe feel more comfortable going to us this stuff than going to lecturers or stuff and obviously you're suppose to go to your personal tutor about things. But that's one of the things I'm trying to fix because that system doesn't always work. I guess having less here is sort of an approachable way in for people to sort of address issues and things like. I'm trying to make that system more visible is the most important thing because it became important to me when I got involved in it, which is concerning in terms of like the system isn't as visible as it should be. I think increasing it's visibility is super important. And that only really works if students get involved. So yeah, I think it's just a super important system because without it, you're letting sort of lecturers and sort of administrative people sort out everything. But when it really affects us. So I think decision making that affects us so much, we should definitely have a say. We were all like adults here that we should be able to have a say in sort of decisions affect us. I think. Well, it goes back several ways. That it kind of happens as I can sort of process and this sort of the FECS on a school level, which is student voice committee. So I attend them with lots of course reps and I tend to go to the as they happen. I mean, for example, there's history, classics and archaeology, that's my coverage. And so that they have their own meetings course reps and then we all come together. And that means that ensures that everyone's getting heard. For me, I only know the experience as a history student. So having some of the classics people come to me and the archaeology people is often hard. So having these sort of FECs. It's really helpful because it means that I can get input from and the other subjects I don't do. And that's how I'm kind of ensuring that all those voices are getting head. In terms of my voice. I think just getting like stuck in as possible to like the opportunities I have like in terms of the the faculty executive committees, like just like kind of speaking up and suggesting things for the agenda. And so whether someone comes to me or something, ensuring that I am bringing it up in the meetings like I think it would be really easy to passively attend and like not say anything because there are sometimes really kind of intimidating. They are busy meetings are a lot people in them. But I think it just kind of getting out your comfort

zone and really doing my job right. I'm a student rep. I've got a representative. So I think talking like making sure peoples ideas heard in those forums that I have available to me. And it's super important and also like one of my favourite meetings is my head of school meeting. And I think that's that can really good opportunity to like speak to the director of education in HCA and the head of school on a and the other reps within the school as well. So it's like me and the post graduate taught and the post graduate research and making sure that we're all on the same page and we can all bring aspects of what people are feeding into us and making sure that heard right at the top where it matters. And so I think that's the main ways. But there's also like I started as of an Instagram for the school rep role, which I'm trying to get people involved with. And in terms of my voice trying to make it accessible to people by making sort of like nice-Looking infographics about things that I'm doing and things I've been said and giving as many updates as possible. And so it's really sort of the ways on actively involved. And well, in terms of my role and the best advice I can give is really just go for it. Just do it. Because I went into it not knowing not much about it. The email came up like electricity grade school. I was like, you know what? It's something to get involved in. It's something extracurricular. I haven't done anything. I just I kind of went for it. And if you if you're not interested in being a school, there's always a course rep. It's kind of a step down. And when we all kind of work together, it's really collaborative. So maybe engage with like a course rep instead or alternatively any anyone is. legible to join your school. Your school voice committee your student voice committee in your school. And anyone can join. It's a great forum to have your ideas heard. And your school and course reps. And like. Remember the name now, but there will be we have important people who will listen to your problems and in terms of advice is getting involved. If you don't want to have a sort of formal role. I think engaging with a school rep is super important, making yourself aware of the system like what's out that you can go to see what are your options? And then I would say in terms of the survey side of things, I think they are a great tool to get and the opinions of a vast amount of people. I would encourage anyone such to engage with that. And because if that is well, then that's such an important part. And then that's what really shapes that they all listen to. I mean, we've spoken about them in meetings we've had and they do come up a lot. So I would definitely recommend filling them in. And then I've been actively involved in that I've done it before. And so I think that is really important because if I'm honest, like. The uni really does listen to them. If that doesn't go away. This uni will take and they'll do something about it and possibly even more than some of the stuff that I say myself. I definitely advise people to engage in that sort of thing. But yeah, as I said, just engage with the system that we have. Like engage with the school reps engage with your course reps. Know who they are and just try and get involved in whatever way you can. That's the best advice I can give.

And finally, Joseph who gives a slightly different view as a post graduate student. I think it's important because like even just in the basic sense, it's good to be head like when things are going wrong. It's important to have a way to go. You know this isn't work and we need some kind of measures to help fix it, especially last year, because I was a course rep last year. And that was an interesting time. But also I think as well in the sense of when things are going well, it's important to like flag up what's going well. Things that can be expanded on and like improved like the year after, you know, like we have a system about like, it was a good practice in the sense if we like, we'd bring a good practice like one of our lecturers would like highly like stuff regarding like decolonisation she'd be, like remind these studies were mostly done by white people on white people, you know. So that's what I like. And I think like that was good practice. And from what I understand, a lot more modules are doing that sort of approach to things as well. And so I was course rep, in my second year as an undergraduate. Then I was a school rep for like undergraduates in my third year. And I'm a post graduate. I'm a school rep again. And also, I'd like attend to stuff like the student voice forums, one of which is today actually in about an hour at a half. And I'm going to that. And also last year, I was like I was trying to help out with the Decolonise NCL campaign, which was led by, I think, a couple of the school reps. And like, you know, it. I just I try and get out there as much as possible because I think that's like, it's an important thing or being a school rep. You know, you are there to represent people's voices, so you have to try and do that and like as many avenues as possible to make sure that what they want to happen happens. You know, and also it's nice in a sense, just to like, I find it really rewarding to, like, have that dialogue. And I think it's something like Newcastle does quite well in the sense that, like, there's always someone to talk to. It might not necessarily be like the vice chancellor, but it's always like somebody who will listen and at least tell you that they're acting on what you're saying. I would say like keep an eye out and like emails and stuff because there's always e-mails go round like we need more bats or like this campaign is happening now. And I think like for with regards to well fair, first off, there's always stuff like the NUSU website and like their Instagram and stuff that I think as well it's important, like just shooting shot and apply. So they'll always be welcoming to like people who want to be reps. Last year, like there was somebody who applied to be a rep after the deadline. And so there already was a rep, but they made a new role just for her because they wanted to make sure that she was still able to have like, they didn't want to push her away. They wanted to be like, if you want your voice to be heard, be. We will, listen. You know, that sort of thing.

Thank you, Mack. Orla and Joseph for your insights into the student voice. In this final section we talk to Dr. Kenny McKeegan, a senior lecturer from the School of Medical Education. Kenny will be talking us through how important statement voice surveys are and how feedback from students is important to him and his teaching.

Firstly, we ask Kenny how does the student voice and student voice surveys influence your learning and teaching practices.

So it plays a massive part in terms of what we do. So we ask our students to provide quite an extensive amount feedback, possibly too much and what we do with that feedback is use that to inform changes that we make both to the programme and to processes linked with the program. So for example, the last few years there's been a significant amount of concern raised by students around matters relating to EDI and how that is represented in the programme. We've made some fairly significant changes to some parts of the program based on student feedback, and we've actually started the group EDI BBS Liaison Group, which looks at aspects of the program and linked bits of the program to make sure that we're better represented of our student body and the wider community as well. So that's plus one bit. The other bit that we look at in terms of feedback is how some of the policies work in the program. So, again, one big concern from students was the ability to have some flexibility when they could take leave from the program if they had something important in their life or a big event for them. So we would listen to that feedback over a number of years. And we particularly the policy which allowed students to have flexible leave for events are important to them as well. So we've got loads of things going on. But I guess because with such a big program, we have 1700 students based around the region. There's lots of bits of feedback that are dealt with more locally than here at the university. The medical school is wide and diverse. And there's lots of areas where students are particularly clinical site that will be a local response to student voice. One other thing that's really important. And again, this is based on student feedback is trying to make a connection between all the students in the program with one another on the staff. And again, based on student feedback, we've introduced Learning Communities, which group students together with a clear staff lead. And the idea behind that is that it's not all about the program and syllabus. It's about all the things that with the program that allow students to connect with one another, do things that are fun, do things that are, you know, that allow a community ethos to develop among a small group of students. So we do lots of things. But I would be open and say that it's not perfect. And it's definitely some areas of significant improvement that we need in terms of improving student perception of student voice. We make a lot of changes and sometimes that way we communicate it was changes and the way that students see those are not ideal and we need to work quite, quite a bit in improving those aspects too.

Can you describe successful interventions that have supported the relationship between academics and students?

Well, I mean, I think certainly the EDI work that we've done with that group has made a significant impact to a range of things that we do. So in terms

of how we develop curriculum materials, our approach and use of language around sensitive areas. We've also made a differences to some of our processes. Which break down barriers from perhaps some groups, student groups that represent protected characteristics. Focussing a lot on that. So I think that has been a success. It's relatively new. And we will be evaluating it. I think that's a big change. The learning community introduction this year, I think that was in response to poor performance in the learning community aspect of the NSS is such a big cohort. It's difficult for students to get to know one another. Well, it's difficult for students to get to know the staff and the program really well, so that the implementation of those landing communities think has been a big part in terms of responding to student voice. The other thing that we've done, which I think I haven't mentioned, is in the last two years we've created a student council, and that student council, involves students that are either student voice leads or Voice Committee leads or reps representatives from the really wide range of societies linked to the program and students from other parts of the program as well. So we've got this. It's almost like a kind have a monthly meeting and we use that forum to discuss things that have come out of student feedback, we've used that forum to look at existing policies and get some consultation on that and you go through things a few times with them. That's been a really big addition in terms of what we've done as well. And the other thing that we've introduced based on student feedback is we've managed to get some funding to employ two year four students who are communication interns. And they've been working on that kind of student focussed communication for the whole cohort about things that are important to the student body and not mouthpiece for the program. If you'd like to just tell them that this is not about trying to just showcase what students are doing and things that are happening in the program just so personalise things a bit more and learn about what other students doing in the programs, the lots of things going on.

Why is it important to you and your faculty that you get this right?

It's important to get right because I think it's important for students to feel empowered and that the feedback they provide is acted upon. And I think we need to be as a program, react to that feedback. And we want to improve the program year on year on year. And a key part of how we improve that is looking at the student perspective and how they see things. It can take time to get things in place. And I definitely think one the bits it really struggled with is lots of lag between students providing that feedback and implementing some of those things because of the size and scale of our program. But it's important because I think we see things one way, but the students see another way and that student perspective is the most powerful thing for us. One of the most powerful things for us in terms of how we develop and enhance and continue to improve what we do.

Thank you, Kenny, Gilly and our three students, Mack Orla and Joseph, feel time and then input into this episode. Thanks for listening. We hope you enjoyed this episode. If you want to learn more, then please check out the show notes. As always, remember to download our past episodes tell your friends like subscribe. Thank you and goodbye