Supercharging the student feedback loop
Swansea University and Unitu (unitu.co.uk)

Swansea University is using edtech startup Unitu’s student voice platform to collect and analyse student feedback in real time, and deliver faster improvements to the student experience.

Unitu provides an online space where an institution’s students, their representatives and staff can raise, talk about and resolve academic and non-academic issues. It allows students to comment anonymously and Dr Patricia Xavier, Swansea’s engineering academic student engagement lead, said this is absolutely key:

“Anonymity redresses the power balance. Inevitably, in the early days it also made it easier for a few students to post inappropriate comments and to troll other participants but we have developed a content policy and, at our request, Unitu implemented a ‘three strikes’ rule for us. But it’s rarely needed now. Students have started to self-regulate and they often spot and challenge inappropriate behaviour before we do.”

Following a pilot that started in 2015, the university rolled out Unitu’s platform last year. It’s already helped the university to identify and act on a number of concerns – for example, students now enjoy more buses and improved learning spaces following discussion on the platform. Dr Xavier said:

“Unitu has enabled us to ramp up the pace of change. Now, we can put student comments in front of senior management easily and quickly and that’s really powerful.”

Unitu founder Anish Bagga believes that his business’s approach to encouraging student engagement improves on the usual surveys and meetings because it’s happening in real time and it’s transparent. But, he says, one of the real USPs is that his company builds it around an institution’s student representation system so it feeds into processes and systems that are already established.

“Swansea is one of several universities we’ve been working with collaboratively since our very early days. As a business, we’ve taken a lot of time to understand the university’s ethos and its needs so we could fashion a solution that’s a good fit. In return, they’ve been patient, understanding and helpful.”

Anish Bagga, Unitu founder.
In Swansea University’s case, this is bringing the added benefit that it supports STEP4Excellence (https://myuni.swansea.ac.uk/step4excellence), a university initiative that, among other things, aims to enhance support and training for student representatives.

Anish says that, for Unitu’s solution to work optimally, faculties must engage fully with the platform’s discussion process. Staff have to take a lead on this and, if they don’t, (perhaps because they’re not comfortable with technology) the results become increasingly obvious as their more engaged peers start to reap the rewards of having a student cohort that feels it is being listened to. In Swansea’s engineering department, where engagement is high, National Student Survey (NSS) student voice scores have improved by 10% since Unitu was launched.

**Getting started with a startup**

Dr Xavier says the work the university put into helping Unitu with beta testing has paid off because they’ve been able to tailor a product around the institution’s needs:

“We’ve got direct access to the developers and they’re always very responsive to what we want. We’re proof that the Unitu platform works.

My advice to any institution thinking of working with a startup is to invest some time face-to-face at the outset, to clarify your objectives and hear the startup’s story. It’s the best way to work out if the solution is going to give you what you need and it’ll pave the way for a productive long-term partnership.

Dr Patricia Xavier, Swansea’s engineering academic student engagement lead