The Future is Fora

It is a formal requirement at the University of Hertfordshire that each programme of study should hold at least one open student forum per academic year; the outcomes are then formally fed back into the relevant Programme Committee.

Students and staff from the School of Computer Science have taken this formal process and together have transformed it into something that is fostering a positive, open and empowering educational community. Our open fora are at the heart of this work; these have been catalysts in the transformation of the student experience as well as exemplifying what partnership means to us as an educational community.

A partnership based on shared goals and values

From the outset student representatives and the student experience team in the School of Computer Science worked closely together to shape how the open student fora should run, and how to best promote active student involvement and enhance the student experience. The following shared values and goals were agreed:

Open means open. The forum is inclusive and open to all students, from formal student representatives, groups of students with a mutual interest to individual students.

Students lead the way. Students are the main actors in identifying the best times for the fora; promoting the fora via word of mouth, social media and posts to the University’s Managed Learning Environment (MLE); bringing their ideas and views to the table.

It is all about the student experience. Any issue that impacts on the student experience can be brought to the table, so students and staff can jointly identify what works well and what can be improved.

Building a stronger student community. The fora should provide an environment where students can meet, build relationships and discuss technical and academic ideas.

Strengthening the student representation system. Through the student fora, student representatives should gain a deeper and more cohesive understanding of the experiences of the students they represent.

An open forum for dialogue between students and staff. Student representatives and staff should jointly facilitate the fora. Staff should support students in terms of logistics such as room bookings, explaining how University structures and processes work where appropriate, and reporting any issues that are beyond the scope of the Programme Committee to the right people within the institution. Staff should also be able to share their ideas and concerns.

Action and recognition. Student representatives and the Associate Dean Learning & Teaching should work together towards ensuring that any issues raised are addressed at the appropriate level with the School and/or institution, as well as recognising any enhancements made to the student experience.

Benefits

Held at different points over the year, these fora served as open and informal sessions, inviting all students to come to the table and share their views. The topics discussed were wide ranging – from bus timetables, differences in the configuration of PCs in different computing laboratories and the learning resources centre, room temperature in the computing laboratories to issues surrounding assessment deadlines – all of which have an impact on the student experience.

Staff and students benefited from the fora in a number of ways:

The fora were open to all Computer Science students. Indeed, distance-learning students were also able to participate via web conferencing. By providing a mechanism for open dialogue – irrespective of level of study, location, mode of study or delivery mode – it has enabled the School to have a greater sense of community.

The fora led to continuous improvement of academic programmes. Students were able to provide timely and continuous feedback on their experiences. This, in turn, allowed student representatives, groups of students with a mutual interest to individual students.

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academic staff to receive richer feedback on their courses than that available through other formal routes. The fora were particularly successful at cross-year improvements. For example, final year students suggested that some of the tools that they were using in their modules would have been useful on the second year of the programme. This was fed back to academic staff; the tools were made available to second year students who welcomed the addition.

**Student representatives were able to meet with individual students and other representatives.** This further strengthened the student representatives’ ability to give students a voice at Programme Committee meetings.

**Students and staff were able to learn more about each other’s perspectives.** Students gained a deeper understanding of fundamental aspects of the University’s and School’s working practices. Staff got a new insight into factors affecting the student experience and, indeed, one programme tutor expressed the view that the student fora were “invaluable, and complemented the Programme Committee meetings very well”.

**Students and staff were able to work together towards influencing matters beyond the School.** As an example of this, the School was tasked with producing a consultation document regarding the future of the University’s MLE. Via the fora, over 90 students contributed and a group of seven collaborators from this effort analysed the data (which included over 7,000 words of feedback and over 30 mock-ups) to produce a report of these collected views of the ideal new MLE, structured into six main strands of the student experience. This would have been impossible without the student-staff partnership. Students and staff enjoyed working collaboratively and jointly applying techniques such as scenarios and storyboarding to a real case scenario that would affect them both (the MLE). Additionally, this was an excellent real-world exercise for the students.

**Impact**

The student fora had such a positive impact on the student experience that we ran five open student fora in 2012-2013 and eight in 2013-14 rather than the required one. The fora were owned, shaped and driven by the students and staff; our approach to the fora has received recognition from the Hertfordshire Students’ Union in 2013 and 2014 in the form of two Student Staff Champion awards. It has also received recognition from the School’s Associate Dean Academic Quality in the School’s Academic Quality Assurance report 2013:

“A series of student led Student Forums has significantly strengthened the students’ involvement with the operation of the programme and strengthened the relationship between students and staff. It is believed that this played a key role in the 13 percentile point improvement in overall satisfaction (to 89%) in the NSS 2013.”

Furthermore, our approach to the MLE consultation report was welcomed by the University’s Steering Group and considered it to be an exemplar for the institution. This shows how the work of our local community is also impacting positively on the wider University community. Overall our work has been instrumental in the creation of a vibrant community that is responsive to the needs of students and staff. Moreover, it is clearly valued by the community as a way of working together to enhance the student experience.

![Some of the many contributors to our fora](image)

Rodney Karemba, Mariana Lilley, Jean Baillie, Dan Barry and Paul Moggridge
School of Computer Science, University of Hertfordshire (May 2014)

“Working on the student fora together with staff and my fellow classmates has really enriched my learning; in some respects it has been like doing a mini apprenticeship gaining hands on experience working alongside skilled individuals. An example of one the things I learnt during the MLE consultation is the application of context scenarios; this provided an in-depth view of not only what we use and need, but how we use it and how it matters to us. I also now feel more of an integral part of the university and that leads to a great feeling of satisfaction. It was good to communicate to staff what it is like studying at the university “behind-the-scenes”.

Paul Moggridge, Second year student

“The student fora have allowed myself and other students to make large impact on issues that involve ourselves from a module level to levels way beyond. A good example of this was our active involvement with the new MLE consultation. I feel our input has been valuable for the University and we greatly enjoyed active discussions about what we felt the new system should keep and change. I think this is a good example of staff and students working together to achieve a common goal. It was only through the excellent opportunities provided by the student fora were we able to become part of an important process to benefit students in years to come.”

Dan Barry, Student Representative