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Effective student communications as a route for boosting engagement in student surveys – a National Student Survey case study

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ABSTRACT

The National Student Survey (NSS), introduced in 2005, provides an opportunity to comprehensively gather feedback from UK undergraduate students. Given the survey results feed into league tables and how the Office for Students regulates universities, the survey is generally taken seriously by higher education institutions. This article provides a case study of how partnership working by student communications professionals at a London-based university contributed to improvements in the response rates and student voice scores within the NSS. The case study, reporting thematic enhancements over a six-year period, discusses how partnership working led to the creation of an institution-wide Student Voice Action Group, and how communications approaches adjusted the focus of messaging, incentives and channel-mix. The case study provides provocations to practitioners seeking to improve student engagement with feedback mechanisms beyond just the National Student Survey; including efficiently utilising digital student communications channels to save on staff resources and campaign costs.

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Introduction

Providing students with opportunities to give course feedback is a well-established expectation of universities in most higher education contexts. Student voice is an important part of quality enhancement processes (Quality Assurance Agency 2018), providing comparable data to inform future students (OfS 2024). Within the UK context, this has been formalised since 2005 through the National Student Survey (NSS) (OfS 2024).

All final-year undergraduate students at UK universities are invited to complete the survey, with results factoring into league tables (Gibbons, Neumayer, and Perkins 2015), as well as how universities are regulated by organisations such as the Office for Students (OfS 2024). Due to this regulatory and market environment that surrounds the NSS, most universities take seriously the expectation that they will promote the survey to students; ensuring representative student samples.

Student communications functions are often given strategic responsibility for driving up response rates in student voice activities (Gilani 2024), yet to achieve this requires institution wide buy-in. This article explores a case study at a Post-92 London-based widening participation institution – Middlesex University – and how incremental efforts to enhance our approach to student communications have resulted in positive changes to both response rates and questions in the survey itself.

Across the six-year period of this case study, NSS responses rates increased from 71% to 81%. The case study provides practical recommendations for those seeking to utilise student communications practices to enhance participation in student voice activities.

Context of the UK's National Student Survey

The National Student Survey (NSS) was introduced in 2005 to provide an opportunity to comprehensively gather feedback from UK undergraduate students. The survey provides useful feedback from universities to make improvements, as well as information for prospective students to choose their courses and universities (OfS 2024).

Despite these noble aims, the NSS is far from criticism. It's argued that the NSS promotes transactional relationships with students and 'customerization', where students provide positive feedback in the survey only in response to being given positive grades (Adisa et al. 2023). Whilst some studies suggest that the NSS's focus on satisfaction is an ineffective proxy for teaching quality that places performative pressures on academics (Thiel 2019), others support the idea that the NSS captures important feedback on the student experience, as long as NSS data is reviewed alongside other student voice mechanisms (Maskell and Collins 2017).

The NSS is open to all final-year undergraduate students within a set window each academic year.

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Response rates are important for universities because the survey results can only be published if universities – and individual courses – receive a minimum 50% completion rate.

There have been instances previously where student-led boycotts of the NSS have resulted in institutions not reaching this 50% response rate threshold and thus having their NSS results not released that year (Buckley-Irvine 2017). Academics have supported these calls and encouraged for NSS to be ended, and politicians have fought to reform the survey. In 2017, a UK wide boycott was instigated, with basis for the boycott being an objection to the idea that TEF – which uses NSS questions on teaching, assessment and feedback, and academic support to assess performances – should be used to allow for an increase in tuition fees.

Whilst there is substantial literature exploring the impact of the NSS on academics and institutional cultures, there is very little that discusses the experiences of professional service staff supporting promotion of the NSS. Whilst academic staff often take a direct role in promoting the survey, student communications teams are increasingly given responsibility for developing campaigns that promote NSS to students.

Six years of student communications improvements – Middlesex University case study

The Middlesex context

Middlesex University, with campuses in London, Dubai and Mauritius, is renowned for its diversity of students and undergraduate and postgraduate courses. As a post-92 institution, it has always placed a great deal of importance on teaching and effectively supporting its students.

The University strategy – Knowledge into Action 2031 – articulates the university's aspiration to be seen as a learning organisation that works with students as co-leaders in the development of a vibrant, global student community (Middlesex University 2021). Whilst Middlesex has always placed a great deal of effort and resources into promoting the National Student Survey to students, it had usually only achieved a response rate that was in line with the sector average.

The 2022/2023 and the 2023/2024 academic years saw Middlesex University increase participation and completion amongst students of the National Student Survey (NSS) to record levels. This case study explores the changes to our NSS approach that have been made over the last six years, which led us to achieve record participation in the National Student Survey.

The story told in this case study is not linear, but thematic. Different aspects of the work that we have achieved over the last six years have been grouped together to provide a set of provocations and/or recommendations for others exploring student voice work.

Student communications begins with staff partnership

Whilst student communications teams are often seen as responsible for maximising students' response rates in surveys, other teams and stakeholders have an important role to play. In research with NSS respondents, being told about the survey by a lecturer or staff member prompts more students to complete the survey than any other single channel of communication or through other individuals (Mori 2024).

In 2021, in collaboration with the University's Student Union, we set up the Student Voice Action Group, with key stakeholders responsible for the communication of surveys, those who engage with activities based on feedback, and those responsible for closing the feedback loop. This includes the NSS as well as other surveys across the institution.

Student voice at Middlesex is approached using three key elements:

- Faculty and University approach – academic staff and other student-facing staff are supported to promote the survey within classes/sessions/workshops and at service desks
- Positive and engaging atmosphere across digital channels and campus presence, with prize draw incentive and multiple chances to win
- Collaborative approach with Students' Union drawing out the student voice and impact of previous improvements

The Student Voice Action Group meets throughout the academic year to ensure this strategic approach translates into actual changes in activity occurring to promote student voice opportunities.

Communicate first to build trust, then to request participation

The importance of student voice and representation for institutions is highlighted by Lowe and Bols (2020) who provide a useful framework mapping student engagement practices in the context of consumer versus partnership approaches and individual versus collective approaches. They argued research needs to look at different ways of engaging students, therefore, representation systems need to be agile to current challenges that impact students. Through our learning, we've acknowledged that Middlesex students

are more likely to engage with the NSS if they believe feedback will lead to tangible changes/improvements in the educational experience.

Given that the NSS is promoted to final year students, there were many opportunities before the campaign to build trust with students that their feedback led to tangible changes. For example, when students complete their pre-arrival survey, they receive a personalised action plan based on their responses. Results are also communicated to Academic Advisors, so that issues raised can be addressed promptly near the start of students' studies (Lawson and Johnson 2024). Similarly, after students complete our Welcome survey we send an email 'closing the loop', which includes details about services that students said that they have a low awareness of, a celebration on topics where students gave positive responses, and a brief plan of how changes will be taken forward to address questions or areas with lower feedback scores.

Middlesex runs termly module surveys, allowing students to use the feedback mechanism to highlight positive areas of teaching and raise concerns. Programme teams respond to all students on a programme-by-programme basis to communicate how their feedback will be acted upon. Module survey response rates have also increased in line with the increases we've seen to the NSS survey participation – the first term module survey was completed by 41% of students in the 2023–2024 academic year, and that figure was only 15% of students in the first term of the 2019–2020 academic year. Research shows that feedback mechanisms should not merely be tools for collecting data but should also empower students as active participants in the educational process (Carey 2015). The institutional push beyond NSS surveys and demonstrating action to feedback ensures Middlesex remains responsive and engages proactively with concerns students may have.

Ahead of promotion of the NSS, communications go out to students reminding them of the positive impact taken following their feedback in previous surveys. This is communicated within the 'Your Impact' campaign. These preliminary activities help ensure that when large-scale surveys are launched, they feel less like performative exercises and more like authentic opportunities for students to voice their experience.

Building a digital communications plan, based on analytics and evidence

At Middlesex, key digital channels used by the Student Communications team include emails, our student portal (announcements and notifications), digital screens and Unibuddy Community platform, alongside print material. The Student Communications team lead

on digital student communications channels to communicate NSS. Pre-COVID, there were concerns that students would disengage with reminder emails sent out through our Customer Relationship Management system, which has the ability to alert students both through their personal and student email. As a result, emails would only be sent out to students at the start of the campaign and then utilise other methods of communications like on campus digital screens.

Whilst there is often an anecdotal suggestion that students do not read their emails, email communication is consistently cited in student surveys as the preferred channel of communication for most University information (Gilani 2024). With on campus footfall dropping during the pandemic, we implemented amendments to the volume and approach in digital communications. We send more emails to cohorts with a low overall survey completion rate, with words of encouragement on the impact of their feedback (see above section).

Over the last few academic years, we've also used text messages and student portal app notifications to send targeted survey completion reminders to cohorts with low responses rates, reminding them of the importance of leaving feedback.

The team were confident that it would be okay to include additional reminder communications about the NSS because of prior work to be more selective on what other surveys were being promoted to students. For a few years, Middlesex has a survey approval process, protecting the Student Communications team from requests to promote additional local surveys through our channels. Surveys need to be approved by our PVC Education and Student Experience, reducing 'rogue' surveys that contribute to survey fatigue (Fass-Holmes 2022). Being selective about other surveys means that the team were more confident in using additional channels and reminders to promote NSS.

The role of incentives and the costs of effective survey promotion

Pre-COVID, to incentivise students to complete the survey, there was a focus more on incentives rather than using the student voice and feedback loop mechanism to encourage uptake. For a few years, a £5 charity donation was made for each student who completed the survey, as well as on-campus incentives such as free pizzas and sweets. To further encourage uptake, Student Ambassadors were hired to deliver a short talk of encouragement in classes, signposting students to complete the survey.

Despite operating on a substantial budget and having more promotional resource, against the sector benchmark Middlesex remained about

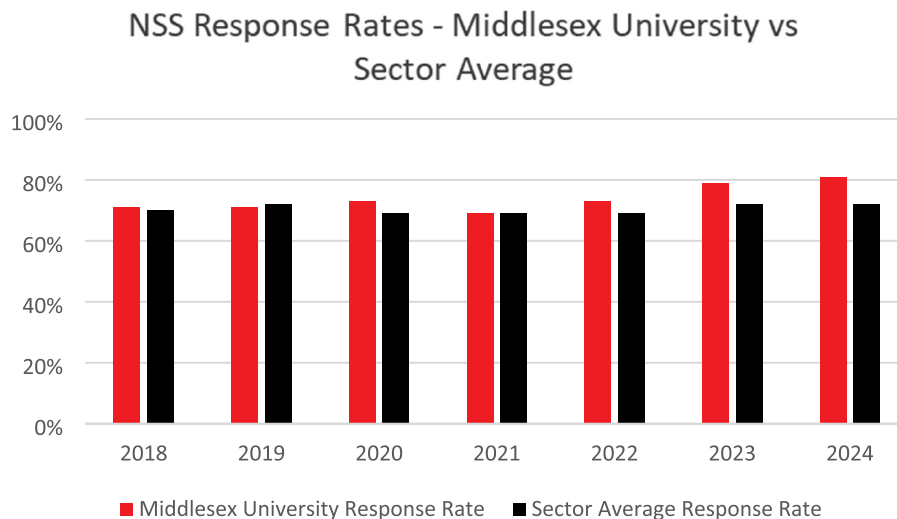


Figure 1. NSS response rates – Middlesex University vs sector average.

average in terms of completion. In 2018/2019 and 2019/2020, the completion rate was 71% and 73%.

COVID required a rethinking of how the NSS would be promoted due to in-person restrictions for engagement. Despite drastic changes in approaches during this time, response rates remained very similar to previous years; at 69% for 2020–2021 and 70% for 2021–2022. This gave the team confidence that a return to how the campaign had been run pre-pandemic was not the answer.

Instead of returning to using student ambassadors to promote the survey, research around the positive impact of staff on survey completion (Mori 2024) prompted the team to focus on equipping academic staff to promote the survey. Previous incentives were not re-introduced.

Furthermore, whilst some students talked positively about the charity donation scheme, anecdotal feedback from students was that this was not an important factor in whether they completed the survey. For 2022/2023, a small prize draw scheme was introduced. This required a fraction of the budget compared to the charity donation scheme that preceded it.

Current incentives and promotional methods ensure limited amount of resource for maximum levels of output, to reduce the administrative burden of overseeing the campaign.

Impact

All efforts have contributed greatly to Middlesex recording NSS completion rates of 79% and 81% in both the 2022/2023 and the 2023/2024 academic years, well above the sector average response rates of 72% across those two years as shown in Figure 1. A table summarising key changes can be found in Appendix A.

During this period, Middlesex has seen great improvements in the NSS questions around student

voice. Whilst comparisons cannot be made across this time period, due to changes in the response scale used in the survey, Middlesex now ranks 5th in the UK across the average of all student voice questions and 4th for the question specifically on students feeling that their feedback is acted upon (these rankings are based off the methodology used by THE in 2023 considering only providers who received over 1000 student responses to the NSS; Jack 2023).

Conclusions

It is important to note that correlation does not mean causation, so it is hard to indisputably prove these changes to our NSS campaign are what led to improvements to response rates and student voice question scores. However, it is hoped that the case study above provides helpful reflections on the journey that we have gone on as a University in this area, which may provoke questions or considerations for other practitioners hoping to utilise student communications principles to enhance student voice participation and survey completion.

Over the past six years, Middlesex has been on a journey to utilise the principles of effective student communications to enhance trust students have in us as a listening and 'learning organisation' (Middlesex University 2021). This journey has involved building cross-institutional partnerships with staff, ensuring that students' feedback is consistently acted upon, utilising evidence to drive student communications channel usage, and being willing to stop low impact tasks.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Appendix A

NSS campaign year	Response rate	Summary/key changes
2018	71%	Physical collateral across campus
2019	71%	Completion session in class delivered by student ambassadors and incentivised with Pizza
2020	73%	- Week of launch activity in areas with high levels of student footfall – including week of fairs with themed days and sweets. - Charity incentive of £5 per completion – students can vote for which charity they want to support – choice of 3 selected by Student's Union.
2021	69%	- Covid-19 – no students on campus - only proactive digital communications - no physical collateral - no ambassadors giving in class talks and no pizza - Resources still given to academics for online in class completion session - Charity incentivisation
2022	70%	- Introduction for Student Voice Action Group – with Student's Union, key stakeholders responsible for the communication of surveys, those who engage with activities based on feedback, and those responsible for closing the feedback loop - Introduction of Survey Approval Process, which protects the Student Communications team from requests to promote additional local surveys through our channels. - Physical banners still on campus - Ambassadors not sent to class but still engaging with students in busy areas across the campus - Move from charity incentivisation to prize draw incentive with multiple chances to win
2023	79%	- Increase in communications to students ahead of campaign launch to promote positive change as a result of student feedback - Launch of Module Evaluation Surveys each term – allowing students to use the feedback mechanism to highlight positive areas of teaching and raise any concerns - We would send more emails to cohorts that had a low overall response rate to the survey completion, with words of encouragement on the impact their feedback has for improving their experience at the university (see above section) - text messages and app notifications on our student portal to send targeted survey completion reminders to cohorts with low responses rates
2024	81%	- Introduction of NSS results comms to student across all years highlighting the campaign successes at the beginning of the new term in September and highlighting student voice opportunities for students – e.g. Student Voice Leader roles - Introduction of NSS Response Rates Comms Cell with Deputy Deans to improve aligned approach to remind students on programmes with low response rates about survey completion in class, and via digital channels from Student Comms team