Student perspectives on their learning and teaching experience – implications for our tertiary sector

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ABSTRACT

It is the collective voices of our students here who share with us openly their experiences of being a student in their diverse contexts. Their reflections weave together to give us a snapshot of several important aspects of being a student in 2023-24. Firstly, is the joy they express; and although these are a group of self-selecting students, acknowledging that joy feels important. With students at the heart of the Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework, drawing on the affective as well as the academic experience is important, particularly given what we know about the importance of student belonging when it comes to a positive student experience. Moreover, our students each offer glimpses into their classroom experience where they clearly felt valued, and that they 'mattered' (Gravett et al.M 2021). Indeed, it is the relational aspect of their student experience that stands out – whether that was with their lecturers, their peers or within the broader support systems within their institutions. We will leave you with the plurality of their voices so you, the reader, can form your own opinions on how our student perspectives resonate with you in your own context.

Keywords: Scotland, student perspectives, universities, colleges, teaching

Introductions

Alessandra: I am an Edinburgh Napier University Biomedical Science BSc (Hons) graduate who started their university journey in Scotland back in 2020, during the Covid-19 pandemic. Having studied up until high school in Italy, I was completely unaware of how the education system worked in Scotland and I approached this learning experience with extreme curiosity and as a formative opportunity both personally and professionally, getting involved as much as I possibly could in initiatives aimed at improving student experience within my institution while continuing my studies.

Andrew: I'm Andrew, a third year Astrophysics student at the University of Edinburgh. My experience of uni has been incredibly busy but in the best way, and I have found it to be such a good chance to meet such a variety of people, a fact that I find really exciting and have tried to make the most of by joining as many societies as possible. I feel that the studying side of things has also been great. I find the uni way of learning much easier than high school because I like the control it gives you. No one needs you to pass, you have to put that on yourself and that's something that I quite enjoy.

Derry: My name is Derry Henderson and I am in my 3rd year at City of Glasgow College having studied a National Qualification (NQ) in Computing before going on to study a Higher National Diploma (HND) in Computing: Networking where I am now in my second year of HND study. Overall, I have had a fantastic student experience wherever I have studied. As I came to college directly from school, I was really worried about what the experience would be as I had heard a few 'horror' stories from previous college students. I feel like as a school student there wasn't enough information available to me about what the transition from school to college would be like and applying for funding etc can be an overwhelming experience – especially for students in my situation as any qualification below the HNC level are bursary supported therefore don't benefit from the Student Awards Agency Scotland workshops provided at school etc. My college experience has been great, I have been supported by numerous members of staff from across the college to ensure my needs have been met; especially as I am a disabled student. The support I have received for my disability has been at the same level or exceeded the level of support I previously received at school, which is certainly not communicated enough.

Jasmine: My name is Jasmine Millington, and I have been a student at several institutions in Scotland over recent years. I was briefly a student at Edinburgh College taking Scottish Highers through night classes and a foundation degree, followed by six years at Edinburgh Napier University for my undergraduate degree. I am now a postgraduate PhD student at Heriot-Watt University.

Martin: Hello, my name is Martin Swapp, and I was born in Edinburgh. I originally come from a farming background but decided to study BSc (Hons) Biomedical Science full time at Edinburgh Napier University in 2020 and applied through clearing. I graduated in July 2024 with a First Class Honours degree and was awarded the University Medal. My student experience in Scotland has been good at Napier as I always felt welcomed and part of the university not only by other students but by lecturers and staff. I met some great friends along the way and joined different sport (badminton, archery) and society (chess) groups which further increased friendships, as well as started going to church.

Valeria: My name is Valeria Ramos. I am a social science student and currently the Students' Association Vice-President of Learning and teaching at City of Glasgow college. My student experience in Scotland has been one with many challenges. As a student immigrant at 15 I had to learn and adapt to the Scottish educational system, with no knowledge of the English language and very little support from my school at the time. I wish there were mechanisms in place to help me fit in but that was not the case. I had to ask and wait to be supported, which made me at times feel forgotten and not looked after, and affected my mental health. Since moving into further education my student spirit was uplifted as I fitted in better and I had more say in my learning experience.

Challenges and joys of being a student

Alessandra: Personally, I would describe being a student in 2023-2024 in Scotland as extremely lucky yet challenging at times. I originally came to study in Scotland to experience an international education system

and gain practical knowledge within my field of study but after four years I feel extremely lucky as studying here gave me much more than that. I had the unique opportunity to get involved in and take ownership of my own learning and as a result to exponentially grow the confidence in myself and my abilities both within my subject matter and more broadly. Despite the amazing experience I had and always having felt really encouraged and supported throughout my learning journey, starting my studies during the pandemic represented a great challenge, especially in the context of having to get used to a new country, culture and education system while juggling life and studies in a second language.

Andrew: Last year was fantastic in that I managed to find a good balance between my assignments and personal life, and there were plenty of societies to be part of that were really good fun such as the ice skating and chess societies. I found that I was able to miss a fair amount of classes for these events and still achieved grades that I'm very happy with, so I think that was a really good decision looking back. I think the workload was well weighted too, enough to keep me busy during the day and make me feel well versed in the courses' material but not an unfeasible amount. I would say that last year, being my second, I felt a lot more used to living by myself and that took away quite a lot of the mental friction that I experienced outside of class in first year, so I could definitely focus more easily on what I wanted to focus on throughout the year.

Derry: It feels amazing to be a college student in Scotland. The amount of knowledge I have gained - and not from just the academic side of things - has been astronomical, and connecting with other students and sharing experiences has been very advantageous in looking at career goals. Also being able to attend industry conferences and exhibitions as a student has helped me network with people from different backgrounds to ensure I have taken advantage of everything available to me before entering the world of employment.

The academic knowledge I have received as a student at college has been great. I feel like as a college student I have learned all the theory and practical aspects so that I can either go straight into the workplace using all this knowledge or go to university with advanced entry – having an upper hand on uni students as I have learned a lot more practice at college.

Now onto the bad… students across Scotland have been severely impacted by industrial action which has made it more challenging as students like me had to work a lot harder in order to gain a qualification. Also, the cost of living crisis across the UK is making it hard for students, as student loans & bursaries are certainly not enough for students to live on.

Jasmine: Being a student in 2023-2024 in Scotland has been a unique and multi-faceted experience, especially compared to my earlier years at Edinburgh College and Edinburgh Napier University. I have faced many specific challenges within education due to my personal health and disabilities, and seeing the landscape of educational accessibility change (mostly) for the better post-COVID has been a game-changing experience in real time. That being said, there are still some challenges that are deeply rooted within the education sector, such as hesitation and fear of student voices, and overworked and under-supported staff members who are facing rapidly changing technologies and information.

Martin: As a student during 2023-24, there were many challenges and joys throughout the year. Some of the challenges I faced include mental health problems which included feeling depressed. I am an overthinker so small things can really hurt me. However, I felt well supported by the friends I had gained who I could confide in and by the friendly nature of lecturers at Napier. Thankfully this did not affect my studies and I found joy in learning about topics I am passionate about and gaining the University Medal

which I am very proud of. I was able to find balance between socialising and studying which made the year less stressful.

Valeria: I am very pleased as a student that our voices seem to want to be heard. I am excited to see and hear about the positive change in the student experience that they will provoke. A challenge of being a student in 2023-24 falls into factors such as our economy. It is expensive and almost unaffordable for many to stay in education. Most students like me work part-time and even with additional support such as loans and bursaries, still struggle. The struggle affects their mental health and therefore their studies and performance. A joy of being a student is the opportunity to learn every day of the week about topics that interest us and through them connect with others.

What makes for 'good teaching' in your opinion?

Alessandra: I believe good teaching in my context comes from three main pillars: student engagement, passion for the subject and student exposure to real-life research. I was lucky enough to have lecturers who were truly passionate about the subject they were teaching, made it their priority to engage students during lectures and beyond, and were active within their research field so they could base their teaching on their real-life experience. The integration of these three pillars during my undergraduate degree made a huge difference for me compared to my previous learning experiences and ensured that the learning is not only relevant and worthwhile but also fun and long-lasting.

Andrew: For me, good teaching is about balancing workload and being organised. I feel that some lecturers put too much energy into making a lecture enjoyable at the price of being hard to follow. A good teacher understands that students need structure to follow within courses, and plans their lectures ahead with a big picture of the course in mind. I also feel that collaborative or group learning is really essential, and workshops are really important in establishing the content from the lectures, without the pressure of having an expert watching you speak. Talking to classmates has been a fundamental part of my learning method so far.

Derry: Good teaching to me is making sure that the content is understood by all learners. Lecturers should be delivering class sessions that are interactive, this allows students to get engaged and ask questions to build their understanding of the content that is being taught. Lecturers should also make sure that all sessions are understandable for the students - using real world scenarios is a great example of this as it gives students more of an idea of what it is or what it does. Most importantly, I expect regular feedback from my lecturers so that I can track my progress and see my strengths and weaknesses.

Jasmine: In my opinion, good teaching should tackle at least two elements of the student experience - teaching for rote learning and understanding information, and teaching for active thinking and exploring knowledge. When I attend my classes, I want to know specific things about the content that I'm being taught - how does it relate to my assessments for this class, how does it relate to the real world/industries outside of this class, and am I expected to fully memorise it or be able to find it again in the future. I also want to be able to use my teaching contact time as a real-time exploratory learning space - can I dedicate space and energy to explore tangential knowledge related to the learning content, and can I bring in related information to combine and entertain something new or unusual within my assessments? The best teaching that I have experienced is when all of these questions are sufficiently addressed without my having to ask or fight for them. It is a much happier and more intuitive experience when I don't need to concern myself with organising knowledge around myself and my assessments and I can focus on learning

for learning's sake. I understand that that is not what all students may care about in their educational experiences, but this is what I would want to experience in a best-case scenario.

Martin: In my opinion, good teaching is when you can see the lecturer is passionate about the topic they are teaching and is able to engage students in the class to see why they are passionate about that topic. This includes not only teaching via lecturing for two hours but also finding ways to engage students via possibly team activities and individual tasks to make the learning not only its fullest but also interesting.

Valeria: Good teaching is the ability to explain topics in ways that suit the student. Personally, I learn with examples, scenarios as well as group discussions. For example, while discussing, debating, and listening to different perceptions of a theory my knowledge expands.

Do you have a sense that there is a higher education sector? If so, how would you describe it?

Alessandra: Despite having a sense that there is in fact a higher education sector, I believe providing a precise definition for it is challenging. When I think of the higher education sector, I personally think of all the people involved in all the universities across the UK including students, lecturers, professional services and all other staff members making a positive student experience possible. However, in a broader sense, the higher education sector can also include all the regulatory and quality assurance bodies that are involved in any type of formal learning after high school and further education level.

Andrew: I would agree that there is a higher education sector, as the uni experience and way of learning is so different to that of high school. It's more in your hands I would say; I felt in first and second year particularly that the weekends are much more similar to weekdays, as there's so much less time in class. I like the responsibility that that brings, as it's your decision if you want to miss a class or put this much effort into this assignment, and that suits me well. High school was much less inspiring as you're constantly working when you're in the building and the school didn't do much to inspire social connections, it was really just a set of classrooms in which we learn things for exams.

Derry: I believe there is a higher education sector and I would describe it as a range of universities and colleges that teaches advanced knowledge to specific subject areas, where students can gain a qualification to demonstrate their knowledge to an employer.

Jasmine: Yes, I do have a sense that there is a higher education sector, and I am aware that it is much larger and more disjointed than I can truly understand at this point. Knowing that there are colleges, universities, and other ways people can obtain education such as industry apprenticeships, I know that at the very least the higher/further education sector should cover all of these areas with overlap, support, and interplay between each group, but realistically I feel like this form of grouping is conceptual and not necessarily the reality of how things work.

Martin: Yes, I do have a sense that there is a higher education sector which to my opinion includes college and university education after high school. I would describe the higher education sector as a highly important sector shaping the lives of many people to hone their skills to be used in the workforce and as a result shape the workforce, contribute to the economy and allow advancing knowledge in various fields of research.

Valeria: The higher education sector educates students to become experts in different areas and careers and create positive change in society. It is a sector that focuses on research and learning.

What would a tertiary sector look like to you (if nothing, that is fine too!)

Alessandra: In my opinion, a tertiary sector should comprise all individuals and organisations involved in formal learning above high school level including what is currently known as higher education and further education. Ideally, the tertiary sector definition would be coherent across the UK within the various nations in order to level the current differences.

Derry: A tertiary sector to me, would be a bridge between school and university or work. I believe that if more information was shared about the tertiary sector then we would have a lot more people gaining qualifications.

Jasmine: A tertiary education sector would look like a well-supported mesh network of all of the different types of educational routes and institutions available to people who want to pursue education for any reason. It would have clearly defined roles, benefits, and drawbacks to each 'actor', and the ability to transition between these 'actors', as a student would be considered and supported by design. Each area within a tertiary education sector would receive funding and other forms of support according to their needs and to better balance students' options to choose fairly and freely between courses and institutions to better teach and prepare students and staff for wider society. The concept of trying to balance the student, staff, and academic experiences with a focus on not just equality but also equity would be a core value.

Martin: The tertiary sector in my opinion includes master's and postgraduate study. This sector in my opinion is an essential part of society that provides advanced education, drives research and innovation, and prepares individuals for professional careers.

Valeria: I think having similar quality systems in colleges and universities is beneficial as both types of educational institutions already in some ways operate in similar ways. Many colleges, like mine, offer higher education courses as well as degree partnerships so it is important that they are both assessed the same way.

Conclusion

This snapshot of student voices, opinions and experience provides food for thought in relation to what is really important to the key members of the higher education sector: our students. They all have a clear understanding of what matters to them in terms of being a student and what 'good' teaching looks like; and have ideas on the current higher education sector, and potentially what a tertiary sector might, or could, look like. Whether that's Derry's "bridge between school and university or work", Jasmine's "well-supported mesh network of all of the different types of educational routes and institutions", or Martin's "essential part of society", these students have identified what should be central aspects of the operation of the new tertiary sector. The joy that this (admittedly self-selecting) group of students is drawing on is palpable, but they are also honest about the challenges many face on societal issues such as the cost of being a student, in different ways. It therefore feels apt to end our student piece by acknowledging that our tertiary sector does not exist in the ivory tower of yesteryear and that defining the many shapes and structures of our many institutions will be what helps us as a learning community of both students and staff to build our universities and the colleges to thrive in this new emerging landscape.

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