

TEF 2023: Student Submission



1. Introduction

1.1. Overview:

This student submission was written by the Vice President of Education and Democracy, the Head of Representation, and the Insight Manager at the Southampton University Students' Union (SUSU). We are a large Students' Union whose mission is to ensure that every student enjoys their time at Southampton. We are proud to have a constructive relationship with the University of Southampton, where we are just as eager to support as we are to challenge.

In the University's submission they consider student outcomes and educational gains to be how a student's time at university has developed and enhanced their knowledge, experience, perspectives, motivations, capabilities, skills, competencies, and values. In this submission we will consider these in the same way, with a specific focus on how the wider student experience has affected these outcomes.

This report looks at experiences and outcomes from two main perspectives: a student's ability to shape and co-design their university experience, and their wider sense of belonging. The first is crucial to keeping students motivated and empowering them to reach the outcomes they want. The latter has a big impact on the University experience as a whole; supporting them to complete their studies and obtain outcomes beyond their course's core curriculum.

Across the University there is a wide range of examples of excellence in these areas, some of which will be considered in this report. In many cases, all the tools are in place for students to thrive, but it is not yet a universal picture across the whole institution.

1.2. Methodology:

Throughout the writing of this report the University has provided the Students' Union with full access to the data used to complete their own submission. They did not try in any way to interfere or influence how this was used and what content was included in the student submission. The data was combined with the student engagement and participation data held by the Students' Union, in addition to the historic research data carried out by the Students' Union and external bodies such as Wonkhe and KPMG. Focus groups and interviews were conducted by SUSU in the Autumn Term to add greater student context to these sources.

The main research considered was the *Big SUSU Survey*, *Settling in Survey*, and the *Lockdown & Beyond Survey*. The *Big SUSU Survey* is the Students' Union's annual survey and covers everything from a student's wider experience to interests, habits, and concerns. It had an undergraduate response rate of 5% in 2021 and 4.4% in 2022. The *Lockdown & Beyond Survey* was a one-off survey conducted in June 2020 about the pandemic. It had a response rate of 3.2%. The *Settling in Survey* is an annual survey for new students carried out in November on their University experience, whether their expectations have been met and how well they have settled in. The 2020, 2021 and 2022 surveys had response rates of 5% to 12% of all new undergraduate students for their respective years.

Minutes from Student Staff Liaison Committee (SSLC) meetings were also used to look into feedback raised formally from 2017-2023. These are termly meetings between academics and SUSU Academic Reps, where reps raise feedback gathered from the students on their course.

Student engagement and participation was considered by categorising students into five different groupings. The first two were *Engaged in Community* and *Community Leader*. These are the students who are members of community groups such as clubs or societies, or those participating in activities organised by academic based societies. The leaders were those students with leadership positions within those groups, such as club and society committee members. The next two were *Engaged in Representation* and *Representation Leader*. These are the students actively shaping their University experience by voting or standing in a student election or engaging in representation processes. The leaders were those students elected as Student Representatives. Students could be in any of these four groups. Those students with *No Engagement* do not appear in any of these groups, instead they form their own grouping.

2. A Student Shaped Experience

2.1. Overview:

Students are highly engaged in representation at the University. In the 2021-22 academic year, 50% of students were *Engaged in Representation*. Across the University a comprehensive system is in place providing students with all the tools required to shape and co-create their university experience. Student voice is strongest where these are being utilised to their full potential but weaker where the localised University culture towards student feedback and ideas restricts this. Strong levels of collaboration with student representation have led to examples of teaching excellence.

2.2. Student Representation:

Philosophy is an example of excellence. In the 2022 NSS, 94% of students agreed with Q23 that they had the *right opportunities to provide feedback*, and 83% agreed with Q24 that *staff value students' views and opinions about the course*. Discussed in the focus groups and supported by SSLC minutes, one development made on these courses and shaped by students is their *Rapid Feedback* system which has been implemented over the past couple of years. Students are able to submit drafts of their key assignments and get feedback, a grade, and time to speak to an academic about it before the submission is due. This allows students to experiment with their assignments and go beyond what is expected or included in the course, without risking their final assignments grade. This is helping them to gain knowledge and competencies they wouldn't otherwise get as part of their course. They also offer consultation weeks where students can go back to academics and get fresh feedback on any piece of work submitted throughout their degree. These are key reasons why at a time when the University as a whole experienced a small decline in the 2022 NSS for Assessment & Feedback (-1% vs 2021), Philosophy had a significant increase to 87% (+10% vs 2021), well above the University and sector average.

Law is another example of good practice. It currently has a high coverage of Course Reps for the 2022-23 academic year, with 87% of undergraduate students represented locally by a

Course Rep (+7% vs 2021-22). Nursing courses have one of the highest student coverage of Course Reps, with 100% of students currently represented (+10% vs 2021-22).

The Electronics & Computer Science (ECS) courses are an example of where student engagement in representation is high, with a high student coverage of Course Reps (75%) and multiple opportunities and methods for students to submit feedback, but a low satisfaction in the 2022 NSS for student voice, such as among computer science students where only 60% agreed *staff value students' views* and 41% agreed that *it was clear how students' feedback is acted upon*. The focus groups and student interviews conducted in Autumn 2022 suggest that this is a cultural problem within the School, with academics not responding well to negative feedback, or the feedback loop not being closed with clear outcomes of how feedback students submit is being acted upon. Students in the focus group also referred to the School as *inflexible* and being very resistant to change. This was also reflected in SSLC minutes where the same issues kept being raised by students multiple times.

An independent review of student engagement by KPMG in 2022 positively highlighted the *clear structure for academic representation in taught courses* and a clear framework for SSLCs. This was also reflected in the 2022 NSS results for Q23 around *opportunities to feedback on how the course is run* scoring above sector average for the Russell Group. The KPMG report recommended providing training to key members of University staff on how to engage with and support Course Reps. This recommendation was rejected by the University, echoing some of the cultural problems which exist in practice across the institution towards engaging with and valuing student feedback.

2.3. Pandemic Response:

The University's initial response to the pandemic was shaped by extensive collaboration with students and the Students' Union and all levels of the institution throughout 2020 and early 2021. They were quick to adapt and address student issues, creating an open dialogue between students and staff, in which students had confidence that what they raised would be valued and taken seriously.

The *No Detriment Policy* is a prime example of collaboration. It was drafted in partnership with Academic Reps and the Students' Union to mitigate the pandemic's impact on assessments. The implementation was quick, and it remained in effect throughout the worst of the pandemic. Similarly, in January 2021, the University acted on a referendum facilitated by the Students' Union calling for the University to refund halls of residence fees to students who were unable to access their accommodation due to the pandemic. A total of 18% of undergraduate students took part, with the final result being 95% in favour. In response to this the University offered a rebate to students who were not able to access their accommodation.

The University was very supportive financially throughout the pandemic. New support funds were set up to help students adapt and fill in gaps in existing provisions, such as the *Digital Fund* to support students accessing computers and adapting to online learning. An *International Student Fund* was created to provide support for international students who were ineligible to apply to many other pre-existing funds. They also provided emergency packages

of basic living supplies to students having to isolate in halls as well as contract extensions to international students in halls unable to return home due to lockdowns.

A range of virtual activities, events and opportunities were hosted throughout the lockdowns to help students settle and feel part of a wider University community. These included social activities such as online *Speed Mating*, quizzes and society meetings hosted by the Students' Union, in addition to development opportunities such as online careers fairs and skills workshops run by the University.

Generally, students appeared happy with how early the pandemic's impact was mitigated. The SUSU *Lockdown & Beyond* survey conducted in June 2020 found that 53% of students rated the University's communication during the pandemic as good or excellent and that 50% rated the support received good or excellent. Feedback around online learning was more mixed, with 43% rating it ok, and only 33% rating it good or excellent.

In late 2021 as government restrictions started to lift, the University quickly flipped back to how it had operated prior to the pandemic, with very limited student input on how the easing of measures would take place. This led to a clash in January 2022 about in person exams where students disagreed with the University's approach. 42% of all undergraduate students took part in a referendum which was open for just 40 hours on the disagreement. 95% of voters called for exams to be held fully online due to concerns about safety. Concerns were highest among computing students, with 68% of Electronics & Computer Science undergraduate students voting in the referendum. This had a very similar set up to the halls rebate discussion, with an issue being raised by students, support being quantified in a referendum, and the Students' Union taking that concern to the University for a response. It was the largest turnout the Students' Union has ever experienced in a single vote. Unfortunately, the University on this occasion and unlike during the early months of the pandemic did not respond to the student voice. The University did not change their plans for in person exams and students felt their concerns had not been heard. This coincided with a shift in NSS scores, explaining the decline in student voice (-2.8% vs 2021) and assessment and feedback (-1.2% vs 2021) results, whilst the Students' Union result significantly increased (+10.6% vs 2021).

Overall, however, the University's approach to the pandemic had a positive impact on students' ability to stay on and complete their courses. The *No Detriment Policy* was particularly useful in supporting students impacted by the pandemic to progress and in reducing any lasting impact on their overall classifications.

2.4. Learning Resources:

There are examples of good practice of learning resources being used across the University. Often these have been crafted in partnership with students, leading ultimately to greater satisfaction from students with their overall academic experience. A common theme to come out of the focus groups and interviews was that there is not a universally agreed understanding of what 'learning resources' means among students. For some, it refers to access to resources like lecture slides and lecture capture alongside the teaching of the course.

Although the pandemic accelerated this process, demand for the use of lecture capture is a story that started long before 2020. It is referenced repeatedly in SSLC minutes over previous years, and in November 2019 a poll was conducted by the Students' Union to quantify student interest in the resource. A total of 6.4% of undergraduate students responded, of whom 97.3% wanted recorded lectures. The main reasons given by undergraduates for this were that it was a good revision tool (85.9%), in case students are ill or miss a lecture (83.5%), or so they could focus on their lecture rather than taking notes (65.8%).

Demand was particularly high for recorded lectures among Chemistry students, where 19% of their undergraduate population responded to the poll with 100% in favour. As a result of this poll, recorded lectures were quickly implemented within Chemistry courses. This coincided with an increase in positive feedback in the NSS around Student Voice, particularly Q25: *It is clear how students' feedback has been acted on*, where 25% more Chemistry students agreed in the 2020 NSS compared to 2019. This trend persisted until the 2022 NSS. Despite the success within Chemistry, lecture capture is not yet consistently used across the University.

For other students such as Physics and Medicine students, 'learning resources' is defined as access to revision resources for assessment such as past papers or practice questions. In the case of the latter, students have resorted to using external providers for question banks to access the expected level of practice questions. This could explain partly why the 2022 NSS learning resources score for the Faculty of Medicine fell to 69% (-13% vs 2021).

For ECS students they defined learning resources as the student collaborative notes that were made for each module and other student-created resources for assessments. ECS Course Reps commented that this was since staff were often hard to reach, and help could be *hit and miss*. Politics students defined learning resources as the quality of lecture slides and clear, accessible reading lists. Although Politics had a poor 2022 NSS score for learning resources of 70%, which was -13% below the University average, students that took part in the Autumn 2022 focus groups said that they had felt heard in the last SSLC of the 2021-22 academic year and felt positive about the future of the course.

3. An Enjoyable Academic Experience

3.1. Overview:

The wider academic experience across the University appears to be outstanding. Teaching stands out as a high point here, while the student experience around assessment and feedback was more mixed, but on the whole good.

3.2. Teaching:

Students appear satisfied with teaching. This was reflected in the 2022 NSS results, where *the teaching on my course* score remained consistent compared to the previous year at 82%. This was also above both the sector and Russell Group average. Feedback in focus groups was similar, with students generally saying they were happy with their teaching experience. Students' Union research has found a similar level of satisfaction. The *Settling in Survey* conducted in November 2022 by the Students' Union had minimal comments about teaching being a factor in why a student's expectations were or weren't met. Available SSLC minutes

since 2017 have very few mentions of teaching as an issue apart from during the pandemic as the University adjusted to online learning.

There are many examples of excellent teaching across the University. The best of these is celebrated as part of the Students' Union Academic Awards, where students are able to nominate staff for one of three awards. A total of 160 nominations for academics were received in 2022, 39% of which were for Most Engaging Lecturer. Most of these highlight the passion and enthusiasm of the lecturer as a strength of the teaching and innovation in how the content is delivered.

Computer Science scored particularly highly in the 2022 NSS for Q3 - *the course is intellectually stimulating*. This shone through in some of the 2022 award nominations, with one student noting in their nomination, '*There is a very high bar for engaging and enthusiastic lecturers in the school of ECS*' and another describing lectures as '*exciting and exhilarating*'.

Politics students explained that teaching can vary between modules, which can distract from the overall experience. Often in the modules that students in the focus groups described as having poorer quality teaching, the levels of assumed knowledge do not feel properly aligned to the stage of the academic journey students are at. These sentiments may have been reflected in the 2022 NSS score for teaching and learning as the BSc Politics & International Relations course was **-7%** below the University average with a score of 75%.

Similarly, Physics students noted that student feedback on poor teaching is not always taken seriously resulting in *problem modules*. This is where a student's experience of a lecturer's teaching expertise varies greatly from other modules in the School. In the focus groups students suggested that this is made worse by the fact that these staff members are reported to be *resistant* to receiving feedback on their teaching from students.

3.3. Assessment & Feedback:

The Students' Union provides an Advice Service offering free, independent, and impartial advice on all issues which may affect a student during their time at University. Over the last three years academic related cases were the most common, making up 44% in 2019-20, 49% in 2020-21 and 52% in 2021-22. These predominantly related to assessment issues, such as appeals and academic integrity. In 2021-22 the Advice Centre supported with over 400 cases related to appeals and 185 related to academic integrity. The proportion of students using the Advice Centre for academic related cases was highest among Medicine students in 2021-22, making up 52% of users, and lowest among Arts & Humanities, making up just 34% of users.

Medicine performed particularly poorly for assessment and feedback in the 2022 NSS. They scored 52% (**-11.2%** vs 2021). The focus groups with Medicine students suggest that this was in part due to the access to learning resources such as past papers. The biggest theme as to why students felt this way was the wide variance in placement experience.

In the 2021-22 academic year, the Department of Politics & International Relations undertook a project, in collaboration with students, that looked at Assessment in the Undergraduate programmes. A survey was co-created with students, and then a follow-up Q&A was set up in

order to expand on the data collected. In the 2022 NSS, Politics scored 61.7% (+5.2% vs 2021) and combined with the positive feedback Politics students gave in Autumn 2022, this suggests that the School have broadly recovered from the dip in student satisfaction with assessment and feedback felt during the pandemic.

In contrast, Computer Science scored below the University average by -20% with a score of 46% for Assessment and Feedback. During the focus group, students in this School explained that they felt that staff had particular and *inflexible* views about assessment and would not consider alternative forms, even when it was raised that multiple-choice exams had very little application to employability, or that there were mistakes in exam questions.

3.4. Expectations:

As part of the NSS, the University monitors through a pre-selected question whether a student's *time at Southampton University met their expectations*. In 2022, 67% agreed or strongly agreed that their expectations had been met. The Students' Union monitors how student expectations are met annually as part of the *Settling in Surveys*. These go out to new students in November each year. The 2022 survey had a response rate of 9.4% of all undergraduates and 12.1% of all new undergraduates.

The main reasons given by the 2022-23 cohort about whether expectations were met related mostly to the course content. 41% of new undergraduate students in this survey said that their university experience met or exceeded their expectations, 52% that it had been met in some ways but not in others, and only 7% said that their experience had been worse than expected.

In the most recent *Settling in Survey*, teaching stood out positively. For students whose experience had solely been worse, it was not mentioned. However, it was mentioned most by students whose experience had been met in some ways as one of the positives, possibly preventing the whole experience from being worse. Workload had the opposite impact to teaching on expectations being met. When mentioned, it was typically the reason given by students whose experience had been not what they'd expected. The other big factor mentioned in determining whether a new student's expectations had been met was the wider University community and whether they had made friends. Both were mainly split between students whose experience had exceeded their expectations, and those whose experience had been met in some ways but not in others.

The 2021-22 *Settling in Survey* presented a similar picture. It had a response rate of 5.4% of new undergraduate students. 42% said their expectations had been met or exceeded, 50% that it had been mixed and 8% that it had been worse than expected. Workload, the wider University community and whether students had made friends all stood out in the report with similar levels of concerns. Teaching feedback was much more mixed, though, due to the transition from fully online teaching in the pandemic to hybrid teaching and then to fully in person teaching. Both 2021-22 and 2022-23 showed big improvements on the 2020-21 *Settling in Survey* responses around expectations. In 2020-21 only 25% of students said their expectations had been met or exceeded and 16% that it was worse than expected.

4. A Supportive & Welcoming Community

4.1. Overview:

There is a high sense of belonging among Southampton students. A survey conducted by Wonkhe in November 2021 on belonging and inclusion received responses from 5% of our undergraduate students. It found that 71% of students felt they *belonged at university*. This question has been repeated in subsequent surveys by SUSU, showing an increase to 75% in May 2022 and 83% in October 2022.

4.2. University Community:

The Students' Union has over 400 student led clubs and societies, many of which focus on academic areas or cultural groups. 45% of all undergraduate students in the 2021-22 academic year were engaged in community activities, such as these club and societies. These have had an invaluable impact on a student's experience at university, supporting their sense of belonging, and strengthening employability after graduating.

Students who engaged in community groups and student representation whilst at university had a significantly higher sense of belonging than those that didn't. In the May 2022 results, 78% of students engaged in the student community felt they belonged and 77% of those engaged in representation felt the same. This was significantly above those with no engagement in the student community or representation where only 60% of students felt like they belonged. Continuation was noticeably higher among students who were *Engaged in Community*. For the 2019-20 cohort, continuation was 7.6% higher among students *Engaged in Community* than those with no engagement at all.

17% of clubs and societies are specifically linked to courses or subject areas. In addition to creating a sense of community among students on that course, they provide extra opportunities for students to enhance their personal development. Most are linked to official institutions or bodies related to their profession discipline. For example, the Physics Society has a relationship with the Institute of Physics through which it provides networking and professional development opportunities.

In the 2021-22 academic year, 11% of students were *Community Leaders*. Because of their leadership experience, these students have gained invaluable skills, knowledge and experience beyond their course curriculum that will have enhanced their employability. Continuation was also higher among *Community Leaders* than students with no engagement. For the 2019-20 cohort, continuation was 8.1% higher.

4.3. Student Support:

Academic support is understood differently by students in different disciplines depending on their individual experiences. Students tended to focus on where support excelled or was lacking, rather than where it met their expectations when defining it in the focus groups. In addition to academic support, wider centralised support is available to all students across the institution through the University's support services and the Students' Union Advice Centre.

Peer to peer support in Medicine is very strong. This faculty is unique in many ways compared to the wider University, with a more connected student community. In the 2021-22 academic year, 52% of all Medicine students were *engaged in the community*. This is 7% above the University average. In the focus groups, peer to peer support appears to have come from students feeling more comfortable learning from their peers, potentially in their home language, or to fill gaps in support from teaching.

Another peer support initiative in the University was *student families*. In Bioscience these are where 4-6 new students as *children* are paired with 2 older students as *parents* to support them in adapting to university life and provide ongoing mentorship. A version of the scheme is also widely operated in Medicine and Nursing. It varies across the University as to how much of each scheme is operated by academic societies and by the University. A similar peer to peer mentoring scheme is also being trialled by the University in Politics, International Relations, Psychology and Art to provide peer led support. In this scheme students are trained to be mentors in a course who will then proactively run support events or drop ins and be available for students to approach for mentoring.

Common rooms and social spaces were mentioned in the focus groups as a positive source of academic support, providing a space to socialise and revise. The Chemistry common room overlaps with the common space used by academic staff, providing opportunities to develop stronger relationships between students and staff or across year groups and levels of study.

There is a similarly strong community in ECS. For the 2022-23 academic year, 85% of Computer Science students are on an official Discord Server operated by the University. 97% of these students regularly log in and use the platform. It provides quick access for students to find support from academics and their peers. This adds a level of informality, making it a less daunting process for students seeking support.

4.4. Widening Participation:

The University has demonstrated its commitment to widening participation with a significant increase in funding and resources put into the Widening Participation Directorate. Through the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2019 (IMD2019) quintiles, we can see that students in the lower quintiles (most deprived) typically perform worse than students in higher quintiles for areas such as attainment, completion, and progression, but that those gaps are also closing. For example, between 2017 and 2019, attainment for the most deprived students in Q1 rose to 83.5% (+1.6%) and continuation rose to 98.6% (+6.4%). Continuation for Q1 (most deprived) was even equal to that of students in Q5 (least deprived) in 2019.

One Students' Union initiative launched in the 2021-22 academic year was £7,000 of hardship funding to support the most deprived students to get involved in sports. Overall engagement in community activities for this year was +2% higher for Q1 and Q2 students, that Q3-5. A higher percentage of Q1 students held community leader positions (14%) than Q2-5 (11%).

In terms of belonging, the most deprived students in Q1 had the lowest sense of belonging. In the *Big SUSU Survey 2022*, only 63% of Q1 students agreed that they felt like they belonged at university compared to 75% of Q2-5 agreeing. Overall students in Q2, so only slightly less

deprived than Q1, had the highest sense of belonging with 78% of students agreeing. It is possible here that the University's increased support has started to have an impact on students in this quintile of deprivation, but that it is not yet fully impacting the most deprived.

5. Student Outcomes

5.1. A Student Shaped Experience:

A student shaped experience is crucial to keep students motivated and empowered to achieve the outcomes they want from their university experience. Where a good culture of listening to and valuing student experiences exists across the University, students have been able to co-create their experience, such as the learning resources available or how they are supported with assessments. The University's pandemic response stands as a testament to how this relationship peaked and has the potential to thrive at the University. The University's response to the pandemic, placing the voice of Academic Reps and students at the heart of decision making, was the most positive example of this culture. There is no doubt that this approach supported countless students to progress through and complete their studies. By contrast, the University's response to the overwhelmingly expressed student wish not to hold in person exams in January 2022 was a disappointing example of the University not listening to the student voice and not facilitating co-creation.

5.2. An Enjoyable Academic Experience:

The University offers an outstanding academic experience to students, with many examples of excellence across the delivery of teaching which is consistently rated highly in the NSS. Teaching is frequently mentioned positively in relation to student expectations. Experiences around assessment and feedback across the University were more varied, but often thrived where students' views were valued, and successes had been kept from the pandemic.

5.3. A Supportive and Welcoming Community:

A student's sense of belonging has a huge impact on their university experience supporting them to complete their studies and obtain outcomes beyond their course's core curriculum. It is consistently seen that students who engage in community activities have a greater sense of belonging than those that don't. It is also an opportunity which allows students to develop skills, knowledge, and experience beyond those who don't, which enhances their employability. The volume of opportunities for students to engage in these activities, and the fact that one in ten students is a *Community Leader*, means that a large number of students are benefiting from these personal development opportunities.

6. Conclusion

The University of Southampton, often working in partnership with SUSU, offers a great student experience, and in many areas the institution achieves its mission of providing great educational gains. It has a generally excellent approach to student voice although the consistency of its implementation could be improved. There is clear evidence that where there is a culture of valuing student voice, student satisfaction subsequently increases. Overall, however, the University is on track to ensure an outstanding student experience for all University of Southampton students.