



## **Teaching Excellence Framework 2023: University of Nottingham Student Submission**

### **Foreword**

The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) continues to provide quality assurance to educational institutions and the opportunity for improvement or establishment of high rating. Since the University of Nottingham achieved Gold rating in 2017, there has been clear desire to continue to improve to maintain this status.

The Covid-19 pandemic has evidently affected the experiences of students not only at this institution but across the sector; learning from this is crucial to ensuring the university delivers for future generations of students. The evidence the university presents for outstanding student experience and student outcomes, alongside learning from past and current events, provides the opportunity for holding them accountable for what they also seek to achieve with their ongoing work.

We would like to thank the Office for Students for the opportunity to provide a student submission, the panel for their consideration of this submission, and the University of Nottingham for their constructiveness in producing this submission.

### **1. Approach to evidence-gathering**

#### **1.1. Our role in the TEF and on campus**

University of Nottingham Students' Union (SU) is the sole recognised representative body for the students studying at the University of Nottingham, specifically the UK campus. Our values are equitable, empowering, brave, responsible, and collaborative. Our strategic intent is to be 'the leaders of our student community, shaping an inspiring and rewarding student experience'. Within this intent is a clear strategic priority to allow students to have an influential voice on their learning experience: we do this through maintenance of our academic representative system, regular polling and research work touching on various parts of the student academic experience, and face-to-face academic advice provision for all students. The SU also provides support to students beyond their education, through our wide variety of activity groups which encourage community building and personal development for over 24,500 engaged members. These groups (circa 500) are led by student volunteers, and include course-based societies; faith, culture and identity societies; arts and performance groups; sports clubs and student-run services.

As a representative of students on the ground, we know that we are core partners of the university in relation to the current student experience. Our consideration around student outcomes is that we can only represent the perception of the student experience and material conditions that may contribute to this outcome data. However, we also believe that participation in SU activity alongside study is crucial to sense of belonging, and can assist students in participation, continuation and completion.

#### **1.2. Collaboration with the university and logistics of this exercise**

Throughout this process, we have been working closely with university colleagues. This has included some collaboration of the sharing of drafts, assistance on interpreting data dashboards, budgetary assistance for the provision of research incentives and research logistics. We have appreciated this assistance and wish to convey that the university have been constructive throughout this process.

This exercise has been student-led in drafting and submission, with the assistance of expert SU staff at points; this has been done to lend specific expertise to this process. I can confirm the university did not unduly influence the content of this submission.

### 1.3. Our definitions

We used the following definitions throughout our data collection:

- **Teaching and learning** included the content that is being studied (including the difficulty and applicability of it), the experience of students within the classroom (including sufficiency, mode of teaching, and engagement) and the perceived quality of teaching staff. Inclusivity of curricula and accessibility of learning was also explored.
- **Assessment and feedback** included the experience of assessment, from assessment design (including mode of assessment), through to completion of the assessment (including clarity and accessibility of assessment criteria), the experience of marking (including perceptions of fairness), through to the experience of feedback (including promptness and level of detail).
- **Learning resources** included all resources to help students to complete their studies, including library, online resources, the use of the virtual learning environment (e.g., Moodle), and any specialist equipment necessary to complete the course (including software).
- **Student voice** included all formal and informal mechanisms to incorporate student feedback into the experience of course, including module evaluation and academic representative frameworks. Staff attitude to and application of this feedback was also incorporated.
- **Academic support** included any supportive relationship with staff, including personal tutors, in-class teachers, and module convenors. It is appreciated that the personal tutor has a particular role in this regard, but students will experience supportive relationships with a range of staff.
- **Continuation and completion** included the ability to stay on and mechanisms to succeed on the course, including specific links to academic support. We acknowledge that the reasoning for individual students who have left is varied and may link to many aspects of the student experience, as well as personal circumstances.
- **Progression** included preparation for career and further study, with a specific link to employability, transferrable skills, and careers provision. We also explored the applicability of the course to the wider world.

### 1.4. Our use of pre-existing data

Within this work, we made use of a variety of pre-existing data that has been collated via the SU Policy and Impact team. This data has been collected and analysed on a termly basis since January 2021, with varying response rates (ranging from c.300-1200). While responses rates are variable, these measures are statistically tested on a regular basis, and we are confident in their validity and the general direction of these trends. To consider student perception in depth we have also used NSS data in a more nuanced way than the TEF dashboards allow, using individual questions where they illustrate specific perceptions more than the aggregated measures. We have confined this analysis to only the 2021-22 exercise.

### 1.5. Bespoke surveying

As part of this exercise, we have used two bespoke surveys that covered various aspects of the student academic experience that are covered by the TEF, including both student experience and student outcomes. These surveys consisted of one survey on academic support, student voice and careers, and another survey on assessment and feedback, teaching and learning, and learning resources.

The design of these surveys considered best practice from other surveys and used a variety of question types and formats; the two surveys were limited to 35 questions in total. This survey was distributed to our Research Panel in November 2022, which consisted of around 400 undergraduate students and were incentivised.

Due to the limited size of this panel, we have not collected full demographic data, but have made comparisons across Faculties and year of study where relevant. Within the sample there are certain biases, particularly in terms of faculty size and the age of our students. These are in keeping within the general size and shape of the university and so are not problematic. However, due to the deliberately small size of the panel, we recognise that there may be issues with representation. At a 50% agreement score, where likelihood for error is highest, we calculate the confidence interval to be  $\pm 4.9\%$  (at a 95% confidence level). As such, some care should be taken when findings are marginal.

All demographic details of both surveys are below:

	Survey 1: academic support, careers and employability, and student voice	Survey 2: teaching, learning resources, assessment and feedback
<b>Faculty</b>		
Arts	31	28
Engineering	26	29
Medicine and Health Sciences	45	31
Science	63	43
Social Sciences	49	35
<b>Age</b>		
Mature	19	11
Young	194	155
<b>Year of study</b>		
1st (including Foundation)	88	70
2nd	54	46
3rd	51	41
4th	13	
<b>Turnout</b>	214	166

## 1.6. Focus groups

A series of five thematic focus groups were also convened and held in November 2022, made up of Academic Representatives and members of the Research Panel.



## 2. Student Experience

### 2.1. Teaching and Learning

As a university, teaching and learning is generally well perceived by students. This is shown within the data dashboards, where the university is broadly in line with benchmark for Teaching and Learning (which is a relatively high benchmark). Within the annual NSS, they also score highly in areas related to both Teaching and Learning Opportunities (which have a smaller level of variance than in other areas of the survey). Across the university, these tend to be our highest scoring areas, ranging from 85% agreement for 'Staff are good at explaining things', down to 73% agreement for 'My Course has challenged me to achieve my best work'.

Throughout the last two years, the SU has used questions to measure Sense of Belonging, including a question on enrichment,

We note, however, that views of teaching may not be universally shared, and specifically, it may not apply to students from diverse backgrounds. In the SU's Winter Survey 2022, which measured perceptions of inclusion, 57% of students agreed that there is consistent inclusivity on the course (n=465), but this answer held statistically significant gaps between students from diverse groups, including women students, black students and students with a disability. We recognise that what 'inclusive' means for these students may differ in policy and practice, and encourage the university to consider inclusivity across a range of characteristics at the programme level and increase inclusivity at the programme level in policy and procedure.

When we asked students to define their experience of teaching in one word, 61% indicated words that were positively coded, against 23% negatively coded, indicating that students are mostly satisfied with teaching and learning. The same was true within frequency questions, where most students indicated that they frequently experienced organised teaching (92%), that key ideas are frequently reviewed and summarised (79%), and that illustrations are used to explain difficult points (80%). Students in general also felt frequently challenged to produce their best work (87%). Where differences in our recent quantitative survey emerges is around the concept of being taught in a way that suits learning preferences; in this instance, only 20% of students felt able to do this 'very often', compared to very high frequencies related to other attributes. This indicates desire for a broader mix of teaching styles, and that students may wish to retain some of the diversity of experience they received throughout the Covid period.

Within groups, some very positive practice was shown in intellectual challenge, where students felt that they were being regularly challenged by staff, with good examples to real world experience, or frequent application to the professional environment. Similar positivity was also encountered in relation to lectures, quizzes and demonstrations were particularly well perceived by students. Students did note that engagingness of lecturers was inconsistent within courses, however.

Similarly, inconsistencies were present in terms of accessibility, for example not all lecturers recorded lectures (which was heavily prioritised in the Covid period), and some were dismissive of student concerns about this. We would encourage all faculties to continue lecture recording, to enable full participation for all students. Students also considered that they would like a rebalancing of the lecture to seminar contact hours ratio, with greater frequency of small group aspects.

### 2.2. Academic Support

Academic support was statistically below benchmark for 2022 NSS scores, although not as severely as Student Voice or Assessment, suggesting evidence of not very good practice. Sports and Exercise Sciences, Creative Arts and Design, and Medicine and Dentistry were the three areas lowest below benchmark here, highlighting key areas for prioritisation.

NSS data shows that being able to contact staff when needed was one of the stronger areas of academic support, with 81% of students agreeing that they can. Given that being able to contact staff is a fundamental part of accessing support, improvements are recommended. In terms of statements on good advice about students' courses and course content, the agreement rate drops to 65-68% showing this is also a weaker area.

Looking at workload support, our 2021 survey showed that only 46% (n=375) of students knew who to ask for help with managing workload. Based on survey comments, we suggest that tutors need to have and make clear that they have the time and willingness to discuss these issues. Additionally, some students expressed that it was both quicker and more useful in cases to ask other students questions relating to their course and content rather than their lecturers or personal tutors, calling in to question the frequency, accessibility and quality of academic support from staff. The reliance on having a social network to have questions answered well and in a timely manner could disadvantage some students without this.

There were additional concerns about lecturers potentially making students feel alienated from them. Students highlighted that strained relationships on their course caused by the way lecturers teach can prevent students from asking for help.

This suggests the importance of lecturers maintaining positive relationships with, and perspectives on, students whilst teaching them to enable students to feel they can ask them for help. We suggest that improving lecturer interactions with students on certain courses is particularly necessary, and a wider understanding of behaviour and social anxiety of students post-Covid is needed.

When asked to provide positive examples of support from staff on their course in our bespoke survey, personal tutors were mentioned more than any other type of staff. However, focus group participants felt they had little to no contact from their personal tutor. They felt the lack of contact had affected them as an individual wanting support and guidance. Focus group participants additionally found that unless their personal tutor taught them, their benefit was limited. This led to suggestions that an academic tutor who also teaches their tutee could be of more benefit. Other students felt benefit from this.

In terms of personal support, focus group participants were uncertain of what was available, though students felt that if they asked for help, it would likely be given. In general, they felt that the onus was on them to ask for support rather than support being proactively offered. This creates concerns surrounding accessibility of support, particularly for students less likely to ask for help or those who have more sensitive issues to raise which they may only be comfortable discussing once opportunity has been created.

### **2.3. Assessment and Feedback**

Since 2005, the NSS has indicated low student satisfaction at the University for this measure, which is reflected in dashboards and has contributed to the University's below benchmark scores. To some extent, the university's low performance in this area is unsurprising, given the lack of substantive change in this area; it has also been a point of decline for the university over several years, both before and during the pandemic. Some of these scores appear to have been exacerbated by the pandemic, with large reductions in specific NSS scores since 2020, particularly around feedback timeliness and detail. Focus group participants also relayed issues during the pandemic in relation to feedback speed, extent, and availability. It is hoped that as the university comes out of Covid restrictions, scores in this area increase.

NSS scores illustrate a tight variance across the concepts of marking, assessment, and feedback, with the statements on feedback, which are 'I have received helpful comments on my work' (58%) and 'Feedback on my work has been timely' (55%), typically scoring lower than other areas for this section. Across the assessment and feedback areas, quantity and quality of feedback appear to be more negatively perceived by students than marking criteria. In various departments across the university student expectations are being met, but this is not true of all

departments. Feedback agreement scores are below 60% in more than half of the Schools, and only one School currently has agreement levels over 80%. We would encourage all departments to scrutinise how student expectations of feedback are met, including directly conversing with students about their expectations.

Typically, we have few concerns around marking and mode of assessment. Within our bespoke survey, most students (70%) felt criteria were regularly explained and 70% felt their assessment regularly helped them to demonstrate their learning. Additionally, only 5% disagreed with the assertion that marking and assessment has been fair. When discussing marking and modes of assessment within focus groups, participants felt criteria was clearly explained and publicly accessible via Moodle. Apart from some minor discrepancies and subjectivity within marking criteria (in particular, the lack of clarity within phrases such as 'meaningful' or 'detailed'), participants felt that assessment criteria were very well understood.

Feedback was, however, more negatively viewed. When asking about the provision of feedback on a draft in progress (which is not a core expectation but may help to clarify student work and allow student success), 30% of students had not experienced this at all, with over 50% irregularly receiving it. When we sought further clarification of feedback around academic work that had been submitted, less than 10% felt that they received detailed feedback on all occasions, with 38% experiencing this very irregularly. Prompt feedback was more often received, although for 8% of students prompt feedback was rare. The differing response patterns indicate that while most students do not have issues with feedback speed, the extent of usefulness and level of detail may be lacking, and practice may differ between Schools.

Focus group findings reflect this. Most frequently participants were able to use Turnitin to see comments on their work, and all participants looked to this when available. Participants felt that detailed clarification on feedback was available but was dependent on two factors: the willingness of teaching staff to expand and meet with students, and students proactively seeking out personal meetings or using 'office hours'. While these strategies are helpful, reliance on reactively seeking out staff could be difficult for those with access needs or where staff do not make themselves easily available (as was the case during the pandemic). Participants also noted a lack of feedback on exam performance. We would encourage the university to explore these concepts in more depth and review feedback policies to improve student perception of structures currently in place.

## **2.4. Learning Resources**

In general, Learning Resources are perceived to be easily available, with most agreeing that they can enhance learning. This reflects that this measure was broadly in-line with benchmark. Within the bespoke survey, the vast majority (80%) of students felt Learning Resources enhance their experience either fairly or very often.

Asking about types of learning resources revealed very positive views on library resources and positive, but still lower levels of agreement on access to specialist equipment. In relation to specialist equipment, lower levels of agreement are largely due to a higher proportion expressing neutrality, as opposed to active disagreement.

Within focus groups, learning resources were mentioned in largely positive terms by students, and students feel able to access the resources that they need. There were, however, notable exceptions such as Wi-Fi, which frequently did not work well enough for students to use it in specific locations on campus (including libraries). The second exception was seen to be certain highly specialised pieces of software, which were of critical use to the programme of study but might not be freely available on campus, or only available in small numbers. In these instances, participants felt that the only way to gain enough access to use the software for assessments was to buy the software (often at a high cost). We would encourage all departments to audit the software that might be needed for a course and ensure free access to all students studying it.

## 2.5. Student Voice

Student Voice is one of the more concerning aspects of the student experience at Nottingham, as evidenced within the National Student Survey scores, which have historically been lowest within this area, and is an area where we are significantly below benchmark according to the TEF dataset. Typical interventions are primarily done through academic representation and module evaluation (i.e., SET and SEM), although other more informal mechanisms are also used.

While the SU recognises low scores in relation to the university's provision of student voice, we must also acknowledge that we are an active partner in this field, and students equally perceive us negatively in both NSS (in 2022, the % agreement score for this was 42%), and within our own data. The SU has committed to reviewing our own practice, both within our strategy and within the forthcoming academic representation review.

Within the NSS, the three questions that make up the student voice section show variance, with the highest point of 76% for the question 'I have had the right opportunities to feedback on my course', a midpoint of 63% for 'staff value students' views and opinions about the course', to the lowest score of 41% for 'It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted upon'. Scores show that while students have opportunities to feedback, they do not feel their voice is valued or, even more so, will not result in change. This view is reinforced in our bespoke survey, which suggests a significant gap between whether feedback is valued to whether it is implemented. While 12% of students felt their feedback had not been or was rarely valued, 19% felt that their feedback was not considered or implemented. Furthermore, some discussions of certain feedback were more welcomed than others. While 68% of students felt that they could give meaningful feedback, this dropped to 52% for feedback about course improvements, 45% about academic support, and 48% about assessment and feedback. It appears that the feedback and voice system might restrict individuals to more 'acceptable' forms of feedback.

Within focus groups, there was a mixed experience of student voice frameworks. While participants were largely aware of the types of frameworks in place, an over-reliance on module evaluation was viewed negatively. Students felt that an overreliance on SET/SEM meant feedback was being received too late in the module to create any benefit for their year. We would welcome more holistic feedback methods throughout courses and modules, so students can directly benefit.

In terms of giving feedback to staff, experiences were mixed. Students noted how they regularly met with Course Directors to give feedback. However, students from [redacted] relayed what they felt to be a very negative attitude to the collection and collation of student feedback; these anecdotes were extreme and amounted to what could be considered a disrespectful, defensive, and dismissive attitude to both student feedback and wider concerns of the student body. We would encourage the university to consider making urgent changes in relation to feedback mechanisms within this School.

The university has recently introduced aspects of curriculum redesign, and a forthcoming review of the academic representation framework. We believe these may help to improve the experience of students in this area, and that changes to certain structures will help improve the student voice framework. However, we believe this needs to be accompanied by a more welcoming and constructive attitude to the collection and implementation of student feedback and the student voice. This should reflect the successful approach towards the Students as Change Agents and Student Engagement Associates initiatives, which have delivered positive results.



### 3. Student Outcomes

#### 3.1. Continuation

While continuation of full-time students was in-line with benchmark, continuation of part-time students was above benchmark. Reflecting this, most students (84%) agreed in our bespoke survey that course support is available to help with continuation if needed; however, 12% disagreed. It is unclear whether this disagreement reflects an issue of individual access to support, or consistency of support within or across courses, however there is evident room for improvement in supporting some students.

In line with expectations based on benchmarking scores, focus group students perceived that if they had issues with continuation or completion, they could go to their personal tutor for support. However, gaining continuation support could pose challenges since many participants noted a lack of contact, or some lack of benefit, from their personal tutor.

Focus groups highlighted examples of best practice in terms of continuation support in terms of course organisation and direct support. In particular, [redacted] reported having most lectures back-to-back, making it easier to manage time and [redacted] had staff extend a deadline after students struggled to meet it. Nevertheless, other students faced difficulties in these areas:

[redacted] noted identical content was taught to their cohort within days, while [redacted] noted that when [redacted] peers struggled to meet a deadline, they were advised to improve organisational skills by staff.

#### 3.2. Completion

Only 6% of students in the survey reported not feeling confident that they would complete their degree in the bespoke survey, affirming benchmarking evidence that completion is an area of strength. However, of those who did not feel confident of completion, [redacted] said this was at least in part due to the University or the course having barriers making completion difficult, or a lack of university support. In the wider sample of students, 43% agreed their course presents/creates obstacles which makes completion harder, which is surprising given the relatively high level of continuation and an indication that barriers may exist without necessarily affecting completion for all.

Additional comments suggest barriers include work being too difficult, too much pressure, too fast, too close together, or not providing enough time to prepare for deadlines, and particularly when combined with individual factors, made completion harder. Individual factors which contributed to completion being difficult for some included health issues and learning difficulties, as well as low confidence in ability.

Based on above findings, we recommend that the University better understands the ways individuals with certain experiences and identities require more tailored support and to consider how they create barriers which can make completion harder.

#### 3.3. Progression

We note that the university is currently in-line with benchmark for progression, suggesting the university is preparing students well. Our own research also suggests that students feel well prepared for progression, with 91% of students stating that they 'feel confident that will be able to progress to a relevant area of work or further study'. Only 9% disagreed with this statement, with the most frequent reasons being a lack of awareness of services in place [redacted] or wider cultural or social barriers to progression [redacted] While we have confidence that the university are largely providing in this respect, we would ask that all services consider additional barriers students may face and consider ways of embedding equity.

The most common interventions students experienced were receiving information about careers (57%), receiving information about placements (51%), the development of transferable skills

(51%), and receiving information about further study (46%). 40% had taken opportunities for growth or development. This further growth incorporates the Nottingham Advantage Award, a well viewed scheme that seeks to embed employability alongside study, which can be assessed at the UG and PGT level.

participants on vocational courses who wanted to progress into the vocation they are studying towards, praised interventions delivered, as part of, and alongside, the course through specific targeted teams. They felt this enabled access to tailored support for degree-relevant jobs, although noted that they would benefit from more tailored support as they lack familiarity. However, students who did not want to, or felt they could not, progress to the related vocation, noted feeling unsupported. Students felt too heavily directed towards specific areas and discouraged from pursuing other avenues students who did not want to become similarly felt unsupported and requested more generic strategies and assistance in finding other career paths. We would encourage Faculty Careers and Employability Services teams to be more supportive to those who may not be falling into the career paths that are most common for a course. Students from non-vocational courses also felt that career and progression support from their course was lacking despite wider University support being somewhat useful. Consequently, we recommend that the university and Careers and Employability Services are more mindful of students with more open-ended career paths.

## Conclusion

The student submission provides supplementary evidence of areas where the university has indicated provision for student experience and student outcomes. In many areas, consultation with students confirms awareness and adoption of these initiatives. There has also been the opportunity to provide a more critical analysis of where further work is required to achieve consistency across the institution, as well as context as to why some areas remain in line with or below benchmark. The recommendations made throughout the submission will remain areas the SU will challenge the university on, following this. Should the university continue to deliver and improve on their ongoing work, we would hope to see TEF indicators capture and evidence areas where excellence is being achieved.