

TEF Student Submission

1. Approach to Evidence Gathering

This student submission has been produced by Kent Union (KU), the Students' Union at the University of Kent (UoK) and has been reviewed by Kent Union Parliament (highest student decision making body), an 18-member panel of student academic representatives

and Kent Union's Senior Leadership Team. This document presents the perspectives of students studying at the University of Kent, based at its Canterbury and Medway campuses. We have used a wide range of data sources from the previous 2 academic years, in addition to the standard questions and free text comments from the National Student Survey (NSS) and the TEF data dashboard. Each of these will now be explored in turn to detail how representative our sources of feedback are, to provide insight into student views at UoK.

The Academic Experience Reporting Toolkit (AERT) is an online tool introduced by the Academic Experience Officer in 2021 that aims to collect both positive and negative feedback from any student, on any academic issue throughout the year. These are then investigated and escalated to the appropriate level within the University; in the 2021-22 academic year the AERT received 139 responses. The tool was used by students from all academic divisions, but the majority of feedback came from students in the division of Human and Social Sciences (40.7%) and the division of Law, Society and Social Justice (34.5%).

Our Student Representatives (reps), through Student Voice Forums (SVF), collate student experience feedback and effectively communicate this to both UoK and KU, acting as a live measure of experience. Across the last two academic years over 600 students have represented the views of their peers and are therefore well placed to give the student perspective. **Student rep feedback** has been collated across the years, both anecdotally and more formally through an annual online survey exploring the experience of our academic volunteers, which received over 400 responses. Most comments came from the division of Arts and Humanities (32.0%) and the division of Human and Social Sciences (20.2%) and the least from the division of Law, Society, and Social Justice (9.3%).

The **Student Priorities** are key areas of the student experience that students are asked to vote on alongside our Leadership Elections via Menti. They have replaced the Full-time Officer manifestos and influence what projects and campaigns the Students' Union will focus on for the following academic year. This approach provides valuable insight into the areas students are most dissatisfied with and need further action from the University and the KU, and gives every student the opportunity to directly affect the focus of the Officer Team. In 2021 there were 4,818 votes cast and in 2022 2,162, therefore this data provides a good indication of the issues impacting students.

We analysed the main **NSS questions**, comparing performance over the last 3 years but also conducted a thematic analysis of the open-ended student feedback comments from both the 2021 and 2022 surveys, where there were 1456 and 1976 responses respectively. Whilst we recognise that the NSS is only completed by final year students, we feel they are in a strong position to comment on the student experience

Finally, after identifying gaps in existing data around student outcomes, we carried out additional student consultation through **online and on-street consultation**. A questionnaire with 23 questions was designed and mapped against the TEF features of excellence where we received 2,932 answers from 374 students. UoK awarded funding to cover the research costs, enabling KU to employ student researchers across eight days to do face-to-face consultation on the Canterbury campus. Students taking part in the on-street consultation were asked five open questions, chosen by a random number generator, as well as three one word answer questions. The responses were recorded by the researchers, and the data was analysed by KU staff.

As KU's work focuses on the improvement of experience, much of the evidence collected through our research can have a negative connotation, given that students are encouraged to share areas of improvement and constructive feedback. It is worth noting that we do have a very positive relationship with our institution and are included in their governance structures, so we have ample opportunities to ensure that student feedback is provided.

Given that the provider submission will not include validated courses provided by partner institutions, apprenticeships and courses delivered outside the UK, the student submission will also omit these. Moreover, we will not focus on part-time students given that the data set available is relatively small at Kent, and would therefore provide insufficient representation to analyse in any detail. UoK has been supportive with our student submission; they have provided us with access to a consolidated data dashboard with additional segmentation tools, financial support to cover the additional costs associated with writing the student submission, as well as spaces on their TEF steering group to share expertise and advice. Independence has been maintained and the University has not influenced the content, narrative nor views of the student submission.

2. Context

There have been two big disruptors to student learning over the last few years, industrial action and the Covid-19 pandemic, which in succession has led to students feeling that their needs haven't always been met. The numerous lockdowns throughout the pandemic had an undeniable impact on the learning and social experience for students, creating a much more isolating and online based learning environment. The University responded quickly and was able to react to the constant change in regulations, whilst supporting the transition to online learning- a new environment for many academics and students. This is evidenced in the 2021 NSS where 75% of students agreed that the information about changes to their courses in response to the pandemic were useful and timely. Student feedback to the online teaching experience was mixed and in November 2020 an online survey was launched on the KU website and e-mailed to all students, aiming to identify areas of good practice, as well as barriers to engagement. We received 478 responses (409 Undergraduates and 66 Postgraduates), with students from all divisions contributing to the research. Most striking was that 81.0% of students said that they disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "I feel the teaching and learning experience that I am currently receiving is value for money". In our 2021 rep survey 72.6% commented that online learning was poor in quality, unengaging and often presented several technical difficulties, especially where staff and students were still adapting to the developing situation. Particular frustration was experienced where courses involved practical laboratory sessions, as these were not possible to an equivalent level virtually. Students did however recognise the benefits of online delivery, such as the flexibility in learning, availability of online resources and the alternative forms

of engagement being more accessible and beneficial to their experience. In response to this feedback, the KU Vice President Academic Experience 2020/21 worked with UoK to develop a Moodle module called 'Online Learning at Kent' which provided students with additional information on how to best use their online learning environment.

One of the biggest frustrations mentioned by students throughout the free text boxes in both the 2021 and 2022 NSS was industrial action, which has been a recurrent problem at Kent for several years. Of the 1,976 free text comments in the 2022 NSS, approximately 330 mentioned the impact of industrial action. The 2021/22 action was particularly disruptive at Kent, with a marking and assessment boycott taking place in the final term of studies, as well as ongoing action short of a strike. This caused significant distress and anxiety amongst the student body, with concerns around resources being removed, not receiving feedback on pieces of work and fears over how the action could affect completion. KU worked closely with UoK to develop clear communications and was successful in lobbying for goodwill gesture payments for students.

It is also important to note that there has been a significant change in the demographics of the student population at Kent since 2016-17, with an increase in ethnic diversity (particularly black students) and those from areas of social deprivation. Within the last 2 years there has been a reduction in the awarding gap between black and white UK fee payers which could in part be attributed to the introduction of online exams and changes to method of delivery during the pandemic.

3. Student Experience

3.1 Teaching, Feedback and Assessment

Our analysis of NSS verbatim comments indicate that teaching is viewed as a strength of Kent, with over 80% of responses related to this area being positive in 2022, only a 1.3% reduction from 2021. Where teaching is delivered in a clear, passionate and engaging manner it contributes to a positive learning environment for students. The course content and structure was largely seen as positive, with 22.0% of all comments related to this area and 66.0% of them being positive. Students explained that having a variety of modules and topics choices that are engaging, intellectually stimulating, and have a real-world relevance were ideal and contributed to a positive student experience. Module choices, passionate teaching and excellent facilities were key areas that came through our on-street consultation with 56.9% of students having a positive or strongly positive opinion on teaching.

From our NSS analysis, students highlighted that receiving timely, detailed feedback that provided helpful advice on how to progress was vitally important to their learning development, but that in many cases feedback on assignments did not meet these standards. Negative comments mentioned that marking was inconsistent (either between markers or with the feedback given on an assignment) or that the marking criteria had not been made clear, so students were unsure what was required or how work could be progressed to a higher grade. Recognising that NSS doesn't represent the entire student body across all years, we sought student opinion through our on-street consultation where it was reported that feedback that was vague, unclear, or lacked sufficient detail to make improvement hindered students' academic progress. Of those asked only 51.2% felt that their feedback was useful, so this remains a development area for the University. The standardisation of electronic feedback through Turnitin's Feedback Studio has resulted in

more accessible and clear feedback for students, which has the potential to have a positive impact on their performance in future assessments by developing their understanding of what a 'good' assessment looks like. Other innovative feedback formats such as short videos, audio recordings and highly personalised feedback have been positively received by students, as engaging alternatives to the more traditional written feedback which we welcome and encourage..

KU is currently working on a project with UoK to explore different methods of assessment which could be more engaging and effective for students. This stemmed from research into reducing academic misconduct following a spike in cases during and after the pandemic, as well as addressing our employability-related student priorities. The Authentic Assessments project aims to focus assessments on being directly related to the industry/area that the course covers, boosting employability and ensuring assessments reflect the skills needed for their industry, rather than applying a one size fits all approach, focusing on written exams where these may not be relevant as a graduate. The project involves a student focused survey and a variety of school-specific focus groups to uncover opportunities, challenges and existing best practice regarding assessment design. In the initial pilot project 118 students participated in the 21/22 academic year, and we have received over 550 responses to date from the ongoing survey, showing a growing interest from students in the area of assessment design. UoK has committed to utilising the data and findings from the Authentic Assessments project to feed into the revised Assessment and Feedback Strategy for UoK, which is a positive direction for the student voice to be embedded more deeply in institutional-wide strategies.

During our on-street consultation, feedback from students indicated that ensuring that courses were well organised, staff were easily accessible and communicated in a timely manner were key to ensuring a positive student experience. Course and subject management has been disrupted over the last few years due to a restructure, moving to a divisional organisation system and the transfer of support staff between areas. The latest NSS scores support that this is an area of development for the University, with this theme seeing the biggest drop (6.9%) in agreement scores since 2021. In the free text comments, opinions towards wider University management were predominantly negative, particularly in relation to industrial action, the pandemic and the subsequent compensation awarded for missed face-to-face teaching. In addition, it was felt that funding cuts and restructures to various areas had lowered service quality and that there were difficulties identifying who to contact to resolve issues within the new structure. For the latter, it is worth noting that the University is working to address this through the successful introduction of NEXUS in 2022 within the library as a central port of call for dealing with queries and signposting.

3.2 Learning environment

Learning environment and specifically learning resources, is one of the aspects in which Kent as a whole performs well, with a value of 2.7% above the benchmark. In the 2022 NSS analysis 80% of the comments that related to academic support expressed a positive opinion, with students feeling that staff were helpful and often went the extra mile to provide additional resources or answer questions. It is interesting to note that Academic Advisors were particularly viewed well, especially when in the previous two years personal academic support was raised as an area for our Officer Team to focus on as a student priority. There was feedback that there were inconsistencies with the system, causing variations in response times, office hours and a reduction in Independent Learning Plans (ILPs- reasonable adjustments for a disabled student's requirements) being

adhered to with online teaching through the pandemic. The collaborative work of the Officers and University decision-makers to focus on ensuring these issues were addressed and making significant improvements, resulted in this issue no longer being chosen as a priority for the 2022-23 academic year.

As part of the increasingly diverse population at the UoK, there has been a 3.1% increase in disabled student numbers since 2016/17. In line with this, UoK has committed to ensuring that accessibility is built into the culture at the institution, which has resulted in the implementation of Kent Inclusive Practices (KIPs). These are compulsory for all teaching staff to apply and anticipate the needs of learners, reduce the need for retrospective adjustments and benefit all students, not just those with disabilities; such as offering digital learning resources, sharing content in advance and making assignments accessible. While these practices would benefit the whole student body and KU values this proactive approach (potentially reducing the number of ILPs), in practice it can be challenging to track how often they are fully implemented. Anecdotal feedback from Student Support and Wellbeing and from our on-street consultation indicate that they are not being consistently applied and that there is a lack of awareness of what they are. There is therefore some work to be done about their promotion, as well as additional training on ILPs and KIPs and their importance for *all* members of staff (academic and support) - not just those who are new to the institution.

Feedback from the AERT (8.7% of comments not related to industrial action), Accessibility Network Chairs from the last two years (elected position to represent students with access needs) and our TEF rep panel has highlighted that the implementation of ILPs (which forms a core component of the academic support system for those with a disability), has been inconsistent and is an ongoing development area for the University. In UoK's Student Support and Wellbeing survey of students with ILPs from 2021/22, only half of the 139 students who completed it felt their ILP had been followed completely. This year, through collaboration with the University, reps have been trained in Equality, Diversity and Inclusivity to ensure they can represent peers who may not have the same background or needs as them. These students are able to specifically focus on issues such as ILP implementation, as well as being the voice of students from minority groups in large University meetings to help with important decision making.

3.3 Decision Making and Feedback Loop

Over the last three years there have been consecutive drops in NSS scores in both the assessment and feedback and student voice themes, highlighting that this should be an area of focus for UoK. Our student reps are best placed to consult with on this, as they are at the forefront of directly feeding back to schools/divisions the views of their peers. When asked, 91.4% of our 2022 cohort of reps felt that SVF's offered the opportunity for student voice to be promoted and were an effective mechanism for students to bring forward issues impacting the academic experience; in addition they enjoyed the opportunity to be part of driving improvement and helping others.. KU is working closely with our student reps and UoK's Student Success Teams to ensure that the existing structures are clearly communicated, that the purpose is transparent and that they are student-led. An example of effective student representation has been in-person exams, which was highlighted as a concern at our student representative training in October, as many had not previously experienced this format of assessment. As a result of this being raised within SVF's, some exams have been kept online where it better fits the needs of the cohort and the realities of

the career that students are likely to move into. For those where an in-person exam is most appropriate, the University is delivering a number of programs to help students prepare; including 1-1 sessions with the Student Learning and Advisory Service (SLAS) and realistic (i.e in the sports hall) mock exams to enable students to be acquainted with the environment.

Whilst the previous example is positive of effective student representation and subsequent action, it was however felt by our student reps that issues and decisions requiring a higher level of University decision making were difficult to enact change on, including areas such as academic administrative systems (Kent Visions), decolonisation of the curriculum and education portals such as Moodle. Whilst our Vice-President Academic Experience co-chairs UoK's Education and Student Experience Board, KU continues to actively advocate for student co-chairing of SVF's and other decision making committees to ensure solutions are found collaboratively and actioned upon.

3.4 Student Experience Summary

Our findings have shown that the key strengths of UoK's student experience are the quality of teaching and learning environment, including the academic support available to students. Development areas mainly centre around feedback, whether for assignments or acting upon more centrally, both of which we are working collaboratively to address and improve.

Our recent on-street consultation has shown that despite the challenges of a pandemic and continued industrial action, the student experience at Kent is a good one. When asked to describe it in one word, 71.1% of students commented positively which can be viewed in our word cloud below.



4. Student Outcomes

Much of the focus of KU is about developing and enhancing the student experience for our members, therefore we had limited feedback about the extent to which students studying at UoK succeed in and beyond their studies, and the educational gains delivered. As a result we conducted additional research to supplement the TEF data dashboards through our on-street consultation. We spoke to students about their expectations of what their first few months as a graduate might look like, as well as their views of how they have personally grown, what skills they

have developed and how they will look back at their time at UoK. This broadly fell into three themes; progression and completion, educational gains and wellbeing and support.

4.1 Progression and Completion

When analysing the TEF data dashboards Kent is broadly in line with the benchmark; given the changing demographic at UoK we were particularly interested in the breakdown across ethnicity, which positively was again in line with the benchmark. Work on decolonising the curriculum embedded into UoK's Anti-Racism strategy, remote learning and providing students with opportunities to strengthen their communities through other projects (such as the celebration of heritage through performing arts and cultural food events) may have aided in this area.. KU is working collaboratively with UoK and students to empower the black community at Kent and address the black awarding gap, this is being achieved through Black History Month events, as well as the research currently being undertaken as part of the Black Student Voices Project.

The University is seeing an increasing number of students from backgrounds with the most deprivation, as part of its widening participation strategy. From the TEF data dashboards, all indicators were broadly in line with the benchmark or above. KU is currently working with the Outreach Team on how to best understand and support students from these deprived areas, and we will be collaborating on the student consultation of the new Access and Participation Plan submission. The UoK recognises that finances shouldn't be a barrier to progression and completion and has various hardship funds available to support students, most notably the Access to Learning Fund which KU aids with processing. In addition, in recent months UoK has been working hard to combat the impact of the cost of living crisis through the introduction of an emergency hardship fund, £3 hot meals on campus, as well as providing the finances for KU to deliver a breakfast club.

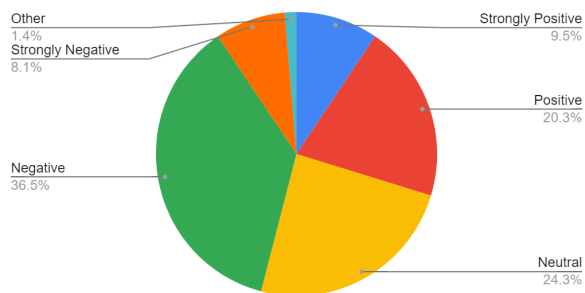
4.2 Educational Gains

We worked in collaboration with UoK to establish Graduate Attributes in 2018 to articulate and explain the ways in which students develop during their time at Kent. Some of these attributes are developed through the students' learning and assessment processes, but many are also developed through their co-curricular activities. KU facilitates and supports the activities of all student groups, ranging from sports and cultural to academic societies, all of which are supported by UoK through the annual block grant. In addition, we receive extra ring-fenced funding specifically for our work around building academic communities, establishing and supporting student groups within this area. These academic societies provide enrichment activities through talks with relevant industry experts, educational trips and discussion panels. UoK not only supports engagement in these societies through the provision of funding, but also through the Student Success Managers in each division who connect these groups with experts and development programmes in their respective fields, providing students with early networking opportunities that can aid in strengthening employability, confidence and career readiness.

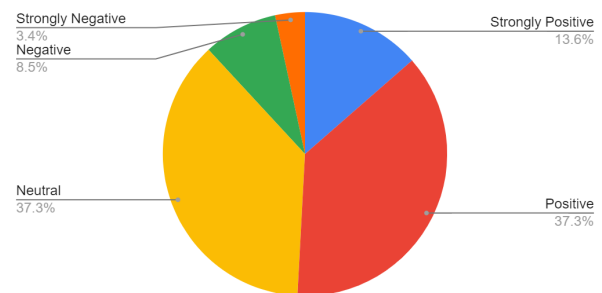
Our on-street consultation with students found that students who were more highly engaged in co-curricular activity reported feeling much more prepared for their career (refer to pie charts below). We found that 44.6% of students reported feeling negative or strongly negative about their career after Kent, whereas this was only 11.9% of those highly engaged students. Engaging with more co-curricular activities shows a clear effect of preparing students for life after University, and

ensures that they have the confidence and skills to move into graduate roles, therefore this remains an important area for the University to stay committed to.

How prepared do you feel for a career after Kent?
(Randomly selected students)



How prepared do you feel for a career after Kent?
(Highly engaged students)



In the same research we found that the most important area to support students for life after Kent beyond academia was careers and employability (15.8%). The Employability Points scheme at UoK rewards students for participating in co-curricular activities with points awarded for joining a student group, as well as being a committee member or planning events and activities. This incentivises the engagement beyond the social element of societies, encouraging focus with the personal development opportunities available through student leadership. With the employability points being able to be redeemed for opportunities such as work experience, mock interviews and even internships, the gains in experience and confidence for the student are potentially two-fold; both in the society experience itself, but also in the rewards they can redeem at the end of the academic year.

Our consultation with students showed that they largely felt (58.8%) their time at Kent had given them the skills they needed to move into their chosen industry. The students who responded negatively (27.5%) explained that they were aware of additional opportunities, however they chose not to engage with them- demonstrating a level of apathy that should be addressed. Whilst additional employability skills sessions are delivered by UoK, commuting students felt they were difficult to engage with and that there should be a greater range offered to tap into any identified skills gap. With this demographic of students increasing, this is useful feedback for UoK. The majority of students we spoke to also felt they would be in a positive position six months after graduation, with 61.2% saying they hoped to be working and 20.9% indicating they planned to pursue a higher level of study either at Kent or another institution. The University is therefore producing confident graduates ready to transition from their Undergraduate studies.

4.3 Wellbeing and Support

An important contributor in ensuring that students continue and complete their studies is the support they receive. As previously discussed, the Academic Advisors and SLAS are viewed positively and as a real strength of UoK. Wellbeing is a theme that has come out across all of our data and has been a student priority for the last few years. Typically this features as a lack of awareness from academic staff on how certain pressures, such as strikes, Covid-19 or the bunching of deadlines impacts student mental health and the ability to continue studying. From our on-street consultation 68.8% of students did feel positive about the support services available, therefore whilst pressures may be coming from academics there was the right infrastructure in

place to provide aid. The University is committed to supporting students with their mental health and wellbeing and we are currently working collaboratively on the Mental Health Charter, as well as other initiatives throughout the year, such as awareness days and de-stress events, so this does highlight a slight disjoin in this area.

Another area that was highlighted as being highly beneficial to both student attainment and wellbeing was Academic Peer Mentors. This UoK scheme matches new first year students to a mentor at a higher level of study; the mentor assists the mentee(s) in understanding assignments, how to apply academic knowledge to their topic, as well as other practical skills such as referencing correctly. Our TEF rep panel highlighted that this proved to be an invaluable part of their settling in process, however that it could be more effective if implemented earlier in the year (currently October/November), since many students had already resolved issues and settled by this point so this is something that UoK should consider moving forwards.

With regards to additional support, feedback from our student priorities data suggests that students desire additional employment opportunities (21.8% of responses), as well as more financial support (10.2%). It was felt that there should be better advertising and provision of part-time work to further support students working alongside their studies. Rising campus costs due to the cost of living increase and a lack of an increase in the maintenance loan for UK students, are likely to increase the need for students to work alongside their studies to support themselves. UoK offers a number of employment opportunities to students including the ambassador programme, working in food or other on campus outlets, and shorter term employment including helping with admissions administration during the summer, however more can be done to promote these opportunities.

4.4 Student Outcomes Summary

Student outcomes is an area that Kent performs well in and is broadly in line with the benchmark, which is positive given the shift in demographic. Through our consultation we identified that highly engaged students felt more prepared for life after Kent than those that do not get involved with co-curricular activities, this is an area UoK should continue to support. Initiatives such as Graduate Attributes and Employability Points support educational gain well and students are feeling confident about their future beyond Kent. Whilst support services and programmes like Academic Peer Mentors are very good and well received, there is however a pressure continuing to be applied by teaching staff which can impact mental health and wellbeing. There remains some work to be done around promoting services and opportunities that support students, bringing their skills together to 'round them off', as well as some thought given how to address some student apathy in this area which is a challenge. When asked to describe their life after Kent in one word 77.1% of students in our on-street responded positively which can be viewed in the word cloud below.



5. Conclusion

Within the context of a pandemic, sustained local industrial action and the changing demographic of the student body at UoK, our submission has highlighted areas of great satisfaction from students and those which require some level of improvement. The student experience at our University is positive overall, with a high quality of teaching, as well as a healthy learning environment with supportive members of staff, and a strong sense of student involvement in decision making at mid/low-levels of the University. Some areas of the student experience where improvement is required, include work related to more effective and consistent implementation of ILPs and KIPs; creating a more standardised institutional approach to assessment feedback that is guaranteed to be timely, clear and useful for students' development to improve performance in further assessments, as well as the accessibility and transparency of how of student-led change can be created at higher-levels of the University

Highlights from student outcomes include a wide range of opportunities for students to build and enhance their employability skills and career readiness through engagement with co-curricular activities, in addition to the ongoing work to empower and support students from minority ethnic and/or widening participation backgrounds at University - academically, professionally, and socially. There are a number of pressures being applied to students by academics which are impacting their mental health and wellbeing, however the support services available are viewed as being very good. More visible and readily available wellbeing and financial support to help students successfully navigate an unprecedented and challenging national climate is a key area of development.

At KU we recognise the University's proactiveness and willingness to work collaboratively with our elected Officers and student reps to address the areas of improvement that have been identified in this submission, as well as many other on-going projects. The view that "more can always be done" is upheld and widely shared by students and staff alike at Kent, which provides us with a good foundation to collaborate on exceptional, pioneering work and exciting initiatives for the benefit of our students. We hope to continue strengthening the relationship between students and the University in order to create more avenues for meaningful, student-led change with trust, transparency and co-creation.