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Approach to evidence-gathering

My method of gathering evidence for the TEF submission of 2023 was fairly simple. With limited time and limited access to different students from Pearson College, I decided a virtual fill- out form approach was the best for me. I wished to get results from students from different years as well as classes, and could not predict when I would be in the building at the same time as them, so a virtual form sent out over email and Discord proved much more effective in reaching those I would not typically have contact with. This also was easier for the people I was asking as it did not require them to travel anywhere nor attend any meetings, the form could be completed in their own time, anywhere they could access the form.

I detailed a few questions on the form that I decided would best get results from answering students, these were simple questions such as "how would you rate the course content taught at Pearson College?"- as an example. I wanted them to be relatively easy to answer questions that could be considered with little thought but also provided a great jumping off place for conversation and further development.

Each question could be answered with a rating of low, medium or high. I then provided a comment box after each of these in turn, those answering could write in as much or as little detail as they wished for these boxes. This provided a clear answer to each question with simple ratings, but also an extra area for personal comments, allowing me to utilise the voices of many students within this paper.

The university aided me by providing data when requested and got me in contact with a student who collected data in the same format but from the Pearson Business College students.

Student experience

Looking at the data

When looking at the data collected from OFS, Pearson College lacks across the board in the area of student experiences. Data collected over the last four years shows the university to be below benchmark for all areas.

- Course content and teaching is   below material benchmark
- Assessment and feedback is   below material benchmark
- Academic support is 100% below material benchmark
- Learning resources is 100% below material benchmark
- Student voice is 100% below material benchmark

From my own data collected from the sharing of my feedback forms throughout the university, the data was higher than official collected statements from the past. This is likely due to the questions being more specialised and also focusing more on more recent experiences, as it can be said that Pearson College improves year by year from the feedback it receives.

Out of my own data collected across the university:

- 60% of the student experience was rated a medium

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- 50% of the student experience was rated a high
- 10% of the student experience was rated a low

Student comments

However, data can only tell so much about the quality of a university's courses. Looking away from the data and more towards personal written experiences of the university can offer a far deeper insight. As a university, Pearson College holds some weight in the industries it has connections with. And much of the university's educational goals seem to focus on preparing its students for industry in a three year course.

Personal experience with Pearson College is in a way limited,

I will begin with discussing Escape Studios then move into Pearson Business College using the data collected   Some areas I have grouped together for ease, and because student experience in these areas are very similar- I have labelled each section accordingly.

Escape Studios course structure, content and responses

First year at Escape Studios is a shared experience across all three of the specialims (which are; the art of video games, the art of animation and 3D/ 2D VFX). First year at Escape is, due to this, very different in format to the latter years of the courses- and is also split into two halves. For the first half of the students are arranged into roughly six classes and all complete a list of modules, each of which is graded and taught individually by one another, and are all meant to teach some form of comprehensive skill that can be applied across the three specialisms. There are also two team projects during this stage- though it must be noted that each of these modules (team projects included) do not exceed two weeks in length. The second half sees the classes rearranged and shuffled, and these classes are taught four individual modules, however these modules all last a month and are based on the specialisms instead of teaching industry practises and generalised skills.

The first year at Escape is viewed by many of the students as the weakest of the three years of the bachelors course. While the modules are comprehensively taught and the module content generally delivered well, most feel the generic nature of the first year is unhelpful in the grand scheme of developing their skills for their chosen specialisms and the wider industry.

Many find the first year unsubstantial, and it appears that Escape designed it as such to offer students a taste of each of the different specialisms before they are pushed to make a cemented choice- much like a foundation year offered at other universities. However it is not offered as an optional foundation year, and is instead a mandatory part of the three year bachelors course with

25% of the overall grade relying upon it- this reason primarily is why many students feel the first year needs overall recreating or complete uphauling.

The second year for each of the Escape Studios courses follow similar paths, the second years are focused on teaching important industry skills with the first half the year more focused on teaching necessary skills, and the second halves more focused on personal growth of each of the students, with the years ending with specialist projects (projects with briefs designed by the students individually, and are to allow students to focus heavily on one area they wish to develop so they can move into the industry with a specialised skill for companies) and group projects which simulate professional industry projects in as many aspects as they can.

Here, however, you can find a disparity between the courses and their quality. Those in the games course rated the content and teaching at Escape during their second year highly, describing the modules as comprehensive, detailed and relevant to realistic skill sets required outside of university. However, there was some disparity in the comments between those who had recently left university and those still studying- it appears that certain course topics were skipped over during the former years, only to be touched upon for the latter years once the students complained and asked for these topics to be taught- creating a system that seems to improve per year depending on the feedback from the students.

Those in the animation and VFX courses however had less positive feedback overall, rating much of the course content as medium as seen by the data collected. Many of the students were unhappy with the amount they were taught during their second year, finding that many skills and specialisms were entirely passed over by the tutors or barely taught, leaving gaps in some students' abilities which was further exemplified when the students moved into their group projects. The tight deadlines of the projects and the need for specific roles to be filled within the teams meant many students either stagnated in their skills or were forced to learn new roles with little help from the tutors outside of generalised help and feedback.

The third and final year of the bachelor course is arguably the most important of the three years, as the grades received here are the most important and make up more than half of a students overall grade, this is also the year where students are pushed to make more of a push to focusing on the industry- with part of the yearly grade dedicated to professional practise (part of the students grade is focused on them showing evidence that they have prepared their portfolios, cv's, and made attempts to interact with the industry). The formats of this year follow the second year just with less specialised classes and teachings, and more entirely focused on honing students' abilities. A focus on honing abilities and industry engagement is fine and often applauded by the games students, however issues arise from the other courses who feel as if they haven't been taught enough in their second year, and are now having to play catch up to the skills they now are required to know in some areas.

Despite this, third year was often said to be the best year at Escape for all of the courses, as it really lets students apply the skills they have learnt and challenge themselves with more difficult project briefs. The influence Escape has with the industry is also really felt and appreciated this year, with many companies sending in recruiters and speakers to give valuable industry advice to students, and some students even getting job opportunities through these connections. The

university places heavy focus on getting the students industry ready for the professional world after college, and in this aspect Escape really excels.

Overall, the three years at Escape are generally received well, and there are areas that make Escape really deserve their high rankings in universities for these specialised courses. Majority of students come out of their three years feeling well trained in abilities and industry skills, however lacking areas within these three years holds the university back, the main negative being the subpar first year in comparison to the quality of the latter years. Despite the drawbacks however, Escape does a good job at teaching students and delivering course content, and they are very good at delivering skills necessary to the industry. Many students rated this area high when it came to data, there are just aspects that could be improved upon.

Pearson Business School course structure, content and responses
Pearson Business follows a somewhat similar three year course progression to Escape, though there are differences.

The first year is variably generic, and teaches the building blocks of business through a series of modules. However it is well received due to how it levels the playing field between all of the students, no matter whether or not they have studied business prior to university. This year is mainly also viewed as a transitional year between A Levels and University for the business students, so there is a heavy emphasis on academic and writing skills being developed. This year also does not count towards the final grade of the overall course- something also different to Escape. There was some negative feedback about some of the mandatory modules however, it seems many students did not enjoy law as a module and the assignments focusing on the VFX industry were not highly rated at all due to many business students simply not having an interest in this. Feedback gave the impression that this could be improved upon by allowing students to make more decisions about what they want to study during these modules. The generic nature of the first year is also intended to allow students to make their own decisions about which pathway they wish to invest time into from second year onwards.

Second year is a definite step up in terms of skill and course difficulty, and focuses on the specialist pathways chosen by the students (entrepreneurship, marketing, finance, law) and is worth 40% of the final grade. It follows the same format of the first year, which is two ten week periods of learning, broken up by a gap in the middle- this is a format enjoyed by the business students. There is also more independence offered in this year, as students are allowed to pick their own research topics.

Third year continues to build on the same format as second year, just with more emphasis on specific pathway research. This also includes the final dissertation for the business students, and is worth 60% of their overall course grade. This year is very well received by the business students, with this quotation to highlight this: "in the final year, we are expected to stand on our own two feet and become a lot more independent and apply everything we have learnt over the last 3 years."
It seems many business students enjoy the times when they are offered more independence.

Many of the business students rated this three year course highly, finding it good at offering a foundation for all students to build off of, and increasing the challenge through the three years felt

natural and was an effective method in teaching specialised skills and preparing students for the industry of their choice once they leave.

Tutoring at Escape Studios
Tutoring at Escape studios is another area that often has a variation of different experiences and ratings from students.

Escape Studios is a highly specialised university, and because of this the tutors hired need to also be highly specialised. It is a difficult position to fill within the university, and while many of the tutors are highly skilled in their areas of specialisation, are helpful, create engaging lessons and offer fair and informative feedback, some tutors lack some of these key elements quite severely, either by failing on all areas highlighted above or having experience in one area but lacking in all others.

The seemingly lack of required general software and specialism training across the board for all tutors leaves a patchwork of different skills that some tutors have experience in, while others do not. From personal experience, I could not ask one of my two tutors during second year for any feedback on my specialism project as they did not have the necessary skills to be able to comment on my work nor tell me how to improve, this left me only being able to receive valuable feedback maybe once a week rather than the three days where I had direct access to the tutors.

The tutors at Escape who are good are often great, offering truly incredible support, invaluable feedback, and teaching comprehensively and intelligently- but the disparity between the tutors who are good and those who are lacking is too great and too varied for it to be highly rated.

Tutoring at Pearson Business College
Generally, the tutor standard at Pearson Business College is rated high.

The standard seems to be that tutors at the college are highly experienced, and teach their courses in comprehensive formats and give useful feedback and advice. The wide variety of experienced tutors also allows for students to approach and learn specific pathways and modules throughout the three year course. The tutors also often offer different forms of teachings, which helps with student engagement.

Overall, the tutors at Pearson Business College are well experienced, engaging and diverse in their skills and abilities, which encourages the students to reach out more.

Resources at Pearson College
Pearson College is a relatively small university. The campus consists of a single building in the centre of High Holborn, because of this, the university cannot offer the resources that much larger and older universities can offer- e.g; large libraries, extensive access to computers or rooms for studying. However, with the limited space also comes a much smaller alumni of students, and Pearson College utilises the space they do have well.

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The university has access to a decent amount of space within the single building it resides, taking up three of the four floors dedicated to the college. All of these floors have a bountiful amount of powerful computers, classrooms, private rooms and open study spaces. Even on days when classes are in attendance, it isn't difficult for students coming in on their own time too find a place to work, either in one of the two rooms set aside for this exact reason or within an empty classroom, or even at the back of a class on a free machine (per tutor allowance). There is also a VPN set up during the pandemic that is maintained to allow students who cannot come in every day of the week to work from home using the universities own pcs. This allows students to really work hard on their projects and this constant access to software and hardware is invaluable.

For online resources, almost everything from course modules, to deadlines, to lessons are uploaded onto the university portal, from here it is easily accessed by all and can be viewed at any time, this encourages students to be independent with their learning. Some students commented that it might be useful for the university to have more easy access to research reports and paid for data and market reports, however they also consistently said that the online digital library is very convenient and well stocked.

The college's industry resources are seemingly vast and cannot be faulted. For both sides of the college, a constant stream of guest speakers and industry professionals are brought to give advice and feedback to the students on a regular basis.

Academic Support at Pearson College
While researching for this paper, the reaction to the academic support at Pearson College was generally mixed. Some aspects were praised while others were not. Pearson College, generally, tries to support their students in as many ways as they can. The university offers the chance to resit projects with capped grades, and can also agree on re-submitting entire projects for better grade outcomes should the university agree upon it.

The university supplies students with personal tutors, who are there to aid students through their academic career and aid them when situations lead to them not being able to complete projects. However there have been accounts of these tutors not being incredibly helpful or getting into contact with students at all.

However, some have said that the academic tutors are actually very useful and tend to always be able to help.

There appears to be a lack of encouragement to learn new skills throughout the years, mostly in part to the disparity of skills known by some of the tutors, and the constant stream of industry like

projects students are expected to complete. Some students feel stuck in one area of learning, sometimes one they did not even choose, due to the fact that during project time, certain roles need to be filled.

Despite these accounts, many rated the university generally as high for academic support. While some students have had negative individual experiences, overall most find that the university offers a decent level of support to its students, answering their questions and allowing them to feel as if they have some control over their grades while being aided by the university. Almost all tutors are able to be reached by email or in person, and offer valid feedback throughout and are happy to give pointers on projects not even linked to university work.

The use of studio assistants is also a university wide practice and this offers another avenue of aid to students who might feel like they need help, these studio assistants are often previous students so can give insight and feedback to current students using the experience they have already accrued through their own time at the college. They are also very approachable, and oftentimes easier to access than the tutors who may be busy.

Engagement with students at Pearson College
Being a smaller university, Pearson College does not have much of a student union, however this does not mean the students do not have input over decisions and matters at the university. The small size of the university is to its credit as students feel they have more of a voice with the smaller alumni.

Student representatives are chosen in the first year (students can choose to go through the hiring process and then be picked by the university if they pass a few online interviews) and tend to remain in this position for the three years (though students may leave or join in any year). These students are met with representatives
                                                                every term to discuss how the courses are going, and bring to light any issues that the students have picked up on. This is an effective method, and gives students a voice directly to the university heads. The every term catch up also allows the student representatives to confirm whether or not issues have been addressed, and from personal experience often issues brought up during meetings are addressed relatively swiftly and even solved between meetings.

While Escape Studios student representatives are usually well known and the issues brought up are often discussed by other students beforehand, Pearson Business College feels a lack of engagement from the university, as they do not seem to be aware whether or not they even have student representatives for that side of the university. While they do get sent emails, often these emails are ignored by a large number of the students, and many of the business students feel as if they'd gain a lot from a similar system implemented at Escape Studios.

Covid response at Pearson College
Covid was a difficult time for many students and universities. However it can be said that Escape dealt with the issue in a very professional manner, and worked with what they had during this period the best they could.

during the height of the pandemic and lockdown, Pearson College was very welcoming, informative and accommodating to their new students who on top of feeling the general unease of joining a new university, also had a lot of anxiety over the state of the world at the time. The university offered many online sessions and welcoming video calls, and managed to even set up a small freshers event (covid rules complying) so the students would at least get some time to get used to each other.

As for the courses themselves, while the course content and delivery was nowhere near as engaging as it might have been in person, this is not the universities fault and simply what they had to work with. Lessons would always be on time, and tutors did a decent job of teaching online, giving feedback and answering questions. The softwares used worked well, and when there were IT issues, the university would work hard to fix them as quickly as they could. VPN's were set up for the students to be able to access university pc's and softwares in case they did not have machine's at home that could run the needed programs.

Overall, Pearson College was quick and prepared to move online, allowing all of their students, current and new, to access the full experience of the university as far as online allowed.

Student Outcomes

Looking at the data

Pearson College's education mission is:

"…to become one of the UK's leading universities for in-depth industry engagement which helps our students develop the knowledge, intellectual capacity and professional experience they need for their long-term careers. Our courses are designed to be academically demanding, industry informed, and to inspire students with a real interest in how their chosen discipline plays a role in the modern professional world."

And this can be seen with their student outcome data.

- Of students graduating in 2019/2020, 59% of students were earning at least £27k a year 15 months after finishing their studies, compared with 38% of the UK as a whole.
- 81% of previous students agreed that their current activity was meaningful, compared with sector -wide average of 86%
- 84% of previous students agreed their current activity fitted with their future plans, compared with sector- wide average of 86%
- 70% of previous students agreed that they were utilising what they learnt during their studies, compared to sector- wide of 72%
- In terms of continuation, the data collected is 94% in line with the material benchmark
- In terms of completion, the data collected is 60% in line with the material benchmark
- In terms of progression, the data collected is 94% above the material benchmark

I collected my own data, as the same as students experience, just reaching out to students who had already graduated.

- 70% of the ratings collected were concluded to be high
- 20% of the ratings collected were concluded to be medium
- 10% of the ratings collected were concluded to be low

Student Outcome feedback

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The focus of Pearson College is to prepare students for the wider industry and working world, and this, despite any negative feedback on course structure or tutoring, is seemingly unmatched and cannot be ignored in its success.

Many students, as seen by the data collected, rated their outcomes as high, though there was some feedback to be addressed.

<u>Skills and their relevance</u>

The relevance of the skills taught at Pearson College within the industries they apply to is highly rated. Many of the tutors and speakers at the university have direct industry links, either currently or in the past, and offer advice and skills not necessarily on the course content- but still very relevant to working in a specific field.   "I use almost everything I have learned from my studies at university at work, the skills are extremely relevant to current industry practices".

The university keeps these practices up to date with the current trends, and will offer new software and research depending on what the current climates are like within the wider working world.

<u>Support to progress past your studies</u>

As previously mentioned, part of the final year's grade is focused on harnessing professional practises with the students, through CV writing lessons, cover letter practise and mock interviews set up. As seen by the data collected by TEF, progression in students from Pearson College either onto full time working roles or further education is 94% and it can be said from personal experience that many students end up securing working roles either full or part time before they even graduate from their third year.

The mock interviews set up, though students are reminded these interviews are purely for practice, pushes students to learn interview skills and also helps build their confidence in applying to roles. Often, tutors will bring up job opportunities and speak to individual students who they think would suit the role. There is a clear push from the university in encouraging their students to both think and apply themselves into their respective industries.

However, there seems to be some disparity in experiences, especially as the students' time at the university comes to a close.

                                    It appears that there is a a slow down of help for the students once they leave university, which in some ways is understandable as the students are no longer apart of the alumni, however for a university that focuses so heavily on the industry, it appears that some level of help after graduation, aside from some skills and a well known name to attach to applications, is expected from some students.

<u>Abilities to build personal development and soft skills.</u>

The university aims to build a series of skills within their students that can be taken onto further education or into the wider working world.

Escape enforces many group projects, and this simulates the industry in many ways. These projects are professional in style and utilise softwares seen throughout the games, animation and VFX industries. However these also aid in team working abilities, something seen throughout the majority of these industries, one student wrote in their feedback box; the university does try to facilitate a working environment by pushing students into team projects where they can't choose their teammates. This forces students to learn to socialise outside of their own circles and is a good mock version of meeting new people in a work environment."

It cannot be ignored that soft skills are a part of this preparation process, just more subtle in nature. Through the many presentations, students are encouraged to learn how to pitch ideas effectively, converse to a room of people, and prepare useful and informative presentations. The dissertations and retrospectives written by both sides of the university enforce proper grammar and language skills when writing long format papers, and subtly teach students how to take subjective views on their past work and think critically about how they might improve. These skills, while not as obvious in their usefulness as being taught how to use software or direct skills about their specialism of choice, are important.