

**Union of Brunel Students**  
**TEF Student Submission**  
**2022/3**

## **Approach to evidence gathering**

The Union of Brunel students' main approaches to evidence gathering include surveys, Advice service data and officer feedback on university meetings they attend. The Advice Service is a free, confidential, and impartial service available to all Brunel students both past and present. As a professional service, data is recorded on student engagement and casefiles are held on Advice Pro, a secure record system. Monthly reports are created to review service engagement figures to understand the key issues facing Brunel students. Student Reps feedback was also used in evidence gathering to ensure data is being gathered from a student perspective.

The Union also invests in externally sourced surveys, where we get to input into the questions asked, we are doing two surveys in 22/23 as we did in 21/22, the year prior (20/21) but as with most data collection exercise it has its limitations. The reason we are committed to surveys as an ongoing need is because we realise that there is a continual need to really get value of a survey like this is unlikely to be fully realisable with a single year's data.

## **Student experience**

### **The pandemic**

There is no doubt that the student experience has altered since the beginning of the pandemic back in March 2020. We have seen all aspects of students' lives disrupted, including their education, living arrangements, employment opportunities and social connectedness.

Despite these significant impacts, the Union of Brunel Students and Brunel University worked together to find positive and innovative ways forwards. We all played an essential role in supporting students navigate through an incredibly tough time and tried our best to continue to create a community and environment that supports individuals to thrive. We adapted to online learning and took a Hybrid approach to allow our staff to continue working efficiently from their homes. We also utilised Teams and Zoom to ensure that we were still able to actively help and support students on campus. We negotiated a no detriment policy which ensured that students were not disadvantaged by a requirement to change rules or regulations, as well as having an immediate move to online examinations. This made sure that regardless of the pandemic that students could continue their studies.

### **Physical Spaces/ Accommodation**

Although Brunel University has developed and maintained contemporary and state of the art learning facilities to support students, both physical and virtual, the reality is with increased

numbers, there is just not enough space to meet the need. Brunel prides itself as being a campus-based university, with most of our students studying full time, however, some taught post graduate programmes offer a part time route.

Apart from having a diverse student population with respect to student ethnicity and nationality, Brunel also has a high proportion of students who commute some distance to get to campus. Being on the Western edge of the London metropolitan area and London being our largest catchment area means that many students need to commute for lengthy periods of time using an occasionally erratic and expensive transport system, so a challenge remains to encourage students onto campus for learning activities.

The Union appreciates that some programmes of study require on campus activity, but we would like to see a continuation and more of an emphasis on the innovative online teaching practices available and see these further developed across the curriculum. Technology can be utilised to allow more flexibility and a more blended learning approach, so our diverse range of students all have equal educational opportunities at a time of great struggle.

The Union also has concerns over availability of student accommodation and the implications the rent reform bill is likely to present for our students, one of the big concerns was associated to supply and demand issues in the private rented sector.

Following the January 2023 intake, halls of residence are at full capacity and there are approximately 120 students on a waiting list (as of 12/01/23) the majority of which are PG International students. Consequently, our officer team are receiving emails from students who are greatly concerned that they have not managed to secure accommodation yet have arrived in the UK and commenced their studies. The recent survey results highlight that the highest level of dissatisfaction for Brunel students is in relation to Accommodation (22%). This is an area needs to be improved – it had lowest score last year as well.

### **Academic Representation and Experiences**

In a survey we conducted in May 2022, specifically, 42% of students said they were satisfied with their academic feedback, 45% with their academic support, 46% with their course/learning experience, and finally 42% with their representation of students' perspectives. In retrospect, these figures are favourable compared to the unsatisfied percentage, which was all 15% and under. However, there have been several issues revolving this topic including lack of teaching space, lack of feedback or urgency in reply to academic misconducts, appeals and complaints, academics engaging or supporting the work of student reps and lack of learning resources within courses.

In the survey, 7/10 students are aware of how to file a complaint or issue regarding their course, and a quarter have already done so. However, there is opportunity for improvement because 3/10 admit they would not know how to. The most common person to complain to is a lecturer or module leader (56%). While 2/5 of the issues were satisfactorily resolved, 1/4

were not, indicating that more might be done to guarantee that issues and complaints are handled properly.

Student Representatives are an integral part to any universities academic structure. The primary role of a Student Rep is to effectively listen, collate and communicate the views of all the students they represent, taking these views to meetings and to staff. There are currently a number of 352 course reps in post at Brunel.

Their roles are:

- To collect feedback from your cohort and to represent that to relevant academic and professional support staff.
- To ensure appropriate action is taken to address the concerns of students in your cohort.
- To communicate to your cohort what your department are doing to address student concerns.
- To collaborate with staff and other Reps to help overcome cross-course issues.

We as a Student Union want to utilise to use of student reps more to increase the percentages from the statistics surround academic feedback and experience.

### **Sense of community**

Brunel prides itself on its diverse community and although in our most recent survey  $\frac{1}{2}$  of respondents felt there is a strong sense of community at Brunel, this means that  $\frac{1}{2}$  of the respondents did not feel that same strong sense of community. The Union appreciates that all areas of student life can impact upon a student's feeling or sense of community and being a part of something bigger.

Recent survey findings highlighted that 82% of respondents feel that being part of a wider student community at Brunel is important to them. Students continue to feel that the University is working hard to maintain a sense of community, but there continues to be room for improvement and opportunities to help students connect. Only half agree there is a strong support network at Brunel, and 1/5 disagree there is a strong sense of community on their course.

Our data reveals that PG students lack a sense of community; 1/4 disagree there is a strong postgraduate community at Brunel which is a concern but not a surprise have historic issues when it comes to engaging PGT/R students. In the academic year 2020/21 the Union's Head of Student Support and Representation started a project to try and understand why this may be and what we can do about it from a Union perspective, the project spanned several weeks and involved 121 interviews with both PGT and PGR students.

One of the drivers for this insight project was due to the dramatic increase in PG students' engagement with the Union Advice Service, in 20/21 the Advice Service supported 547 Level 5 students compared to just 10 in 2018/19. It became clear that one of the biggest hurdles around providing an inclusive environment for PGT students was how the academic year is structured, more specifically that academic year is geared around the standard UG student

experience, for example: activities and events come to by May even though there are still many PG student residing and working on campus.

Fundamentally, although there were several observations made, inconsistency across Communication, online teaching provision, feedback and expectation of students was a solid theme. It was also very apparent that PGT would value more opportunity for peer-to-peer Experience, dedicated Social Spaces and targeted communications. Both the Union and the University need to do much more focused work on understanding and delivering a student experience where they feel a part of the Brunel community.

## Academic Support at Brunel: A student perspective

### Resources, support and student engagement

#### **SE4 How well the university or college supports staff professional development and academic practice**

While this was difficult to gather data on, from a student perspective anecdotally students seemed happy that staff were able to access all relevant information. Brunel has numbers of high quality online and in-person trainings. Trainings available include ED&I, mental health and disabilities related training, as well as some trainings helpful for teaching like creating and managing groups, setting up quizzes, monitoring students' progress, or some research related, research ethics for reviewers or supervisors. In general, the materials provided should equip staff with tools that would enable them to deliver their teaching in consideration for everyone.

While the trainings available are excellent and staff are encouraged to complete as many of them as they can, it has been an issue to get all staff to renew their trainings or complete the new ones. Only limited trainings are deemed as mandatory and even those often are not treated with enough seriousness, as there are no penalties for not completing them in timely manner. Often when sabbatical officers go to departmental management board meetings, they hear just how low the numbers of completion can be. It could be due to Staff's limited time, when the workload becomes too much, that the trainings naturally end at the bottom of the list.

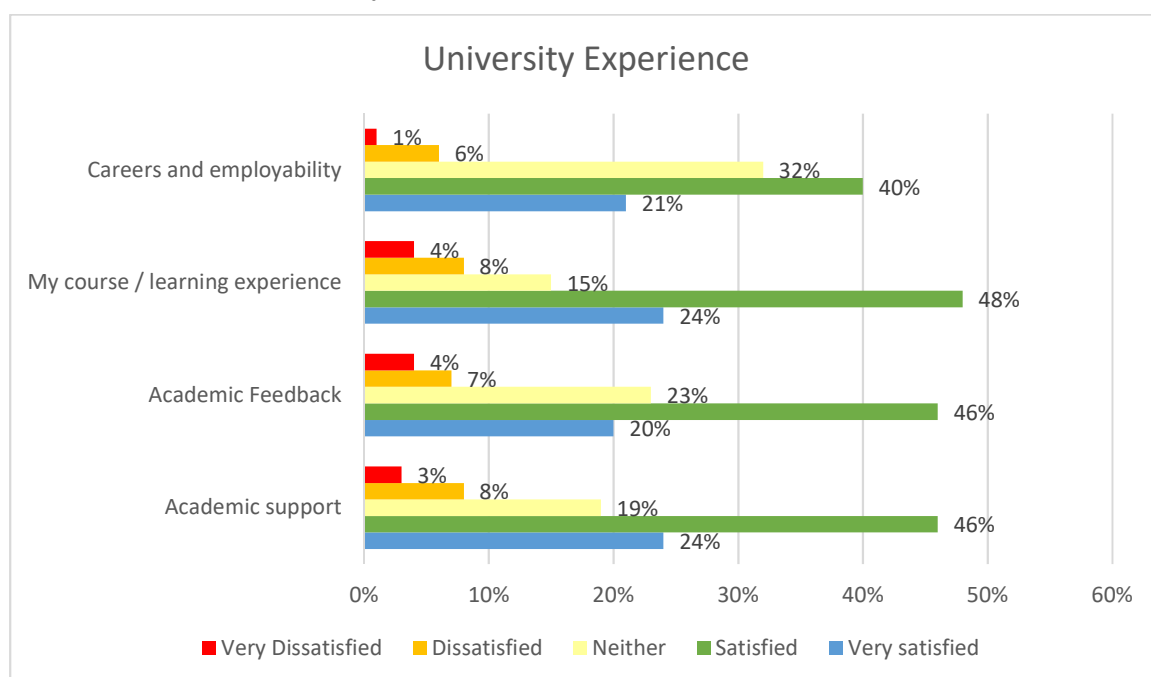
One example could be a recent change of the VLE platform. There have been multiple workshops, training sessions offer for Staff, previously and after launching the platform. All Staff were also able to be actively involved in setting up the VLE before its launch. There have been great opportunities but again, in some departments it has been difficult to ensure all Staff complete the required training even though it was quite crucial to their work going forward.

Training in general is difficult to get staff to do as little is mandatory and there is limited ability to make staff do it. Examples include New VLE training, ED&I training, "Mandatory training" not actually enforced.

#### **SE5 How supportive the learning environment is, and how far students can access the academic support they need.**

Learning environment varies wildly by course and staff member. While this high level of variance is a real issue that can be seen in both teaching and academic support received from

personal tutors etc. the most recent survey conducted by the Union suggests that most students are satisfied or very satisfied with the academic support available to them.



The University offers multiple different services to help students with their academic skills as well as their development in the future, outside of the university.

ASK (Academic Skills service) is one of the services that is highly appreciated by the student that choose to engage with it. What is most important, it offers help with relatable to student's subjects, areas where Brunel students find themselves lacking the most like for example academic writing or statistics. The sessions are run by Staff with real and relevant experience. PDC (Professional Development Centre) is another valued by student's service. It offers help with placements as well as future development. The service offers a lot of form events with guest speakers, work fayres to 1 on 1 sessions with advisors. Students who have been able to use the service have found the experience helpful, especially before graduating and needing to make significant decisions about their future careers.

Unfortunately, the engagement with those is not as high as it should be. Most of the teaching Staff try to introduce students to those services during their lectures. We started also seeing more lecturers not only introducing but also reminding students of the services on multiple occasions, especially before the exam periods. It would be ideal if that were a rule for all.

Personal Tutors in Brunel are the first person of contact and signposting for students. Students' experience with personal tutors can vary a lot not only between colleges but sometimes also within the same department or course. While some students find their personal tutors to be one of the most important persons in their academic journey, others have quite the opposite experience, sometimes not ever meeting their tutor. Tutors' people skills, understanding of mental health, requirement and completion of various trainings, level of

experience and workload can vary massively. Some tutors can be very pro-active by reaching out multiple times during the year, some stick to the minimum and take more of a passive approach. A tutor's workload has a huge effect on the relationship between them and a student, students often mention having to wait significant amount of time for responses to their emails. Tutor to student ratio can be as low as less than 1 to 10 or in a different department, it can be as high as 1 to 40. As a result of that students can feel unsupported and unfairly treated if they compare themselves to their 'luckier' colleagues.

## **SE6 How well physical and virtual learning resources support teaching and learning**

### **Library**

Students are usually satisfied with library and the books provided. You do have to be quick with borrowing books that are popular titles in reading lists but all of those are available for free online, so it is all accessible. Students enjoy studying in the library alone or in big groups, as there are separate spaces for quiet and not so quiet learning. Many who live on campus appreciate the 24/7 opening times of the facilities, as some prefer to study late or very early. You cannot enter the library if you do not have your physical ID on you, which can disadvantage commuting students, especially when some of the lecture rooms are placed inside the library, which means that if you forget your physical ID card home, you can be forced to miss your lecture.

### **Laptop Loans**

That has been an extremely positive service. Students can loan laptops for a short period, for example for writing exams or they can loan it for the full year. Students are also able to loan other professional devices like cameras, microphones, etc.

### **Brightspace and online learning spaces**

Brunel has changed their VLE this academic year (2022/23) so there is not much data on student's feelings about the new platform. However, anecdotally it is a positive change, which many new useful features like universal look for different modules or a synchronised calendar with outlook.

### **Lecture Capture**

Lecture capture technology needs improvements in sound quality, which is an issue especially with live hybrid lectures. Overall, students appreciate it exists and get most of it, often using it when they could not attend lectures or when reviewing the material. Most of the lecturers record all the sessions but there are some that do not do it regularly enough or upload old recordings.

### **Other physical space**

Increasing student numbers put pressure on teaching space as well as extra-curricular activities and events. Students from certain courses have been complaining about having to attend lectures online just because there was not an available room big enough for their cohort. There have been instances where students need to stand as there was not enough space for them as well as situations where students turned up and were told to find a place on campus to take the lecture online, as the room could not fit them all. The lack of room also put pressure on our societies and those engaged in organising various events.

## **Issues in learning resources**

Although the university has undertaken additional learning resources and development of new programmes, the university appears to have changed its mind about expecting students to attend in-person classes, despite the development of online tools for students and the disclosure to students at the start of the 22–23 academic year that they could attend online rather than come to campus. Due to the current affordability problem and cost-of-living crisis, many students felt they were not able to invest the additional money necessary to travel to Brunel or secure housing on campus. Students then began to think about leaving university completely as a result.

## **SE7 How well the university or college engages with its students, leading to improvements to the experiences and outcomes of its student**

There are well established formal processes for student engagement from a network of course reps to representation through elected sabbatical officers. The University also has various online feedback mechanisms including opportunities at local level primarily through the 'Your Voice' survey, carried out by the academics of each department. Following the Board of Studies meetings for each programme, the scores and free text comments are actively used to improve the module's instruction.

Students' feedback is important to the University and there is demonstrable effort to include and invite students to as many meetings and committees as feasible. Student reps are part of 2 regular meetings: Student Experience committees and Board of Studies. The sabbatical Officers seem to be the main and sometimes only point of contact for student feedback, they are being invited to a considerable number of committees, including but not limited to: Council (including the sub-committees), Senate, Access and Participation Committee, Anti-Racism Working Group, College and University Education Committee, ED&I Committees, Student Experience and Welfare Committee, Study Boards, Student Experience Committees, Department Management Boards. They also sit on Academic Misconduct, Professional suitability, etc. Panels to ensure students' voice is being represented.

There is however inconsistency between colleges and departments in the university as far as engagement through these channels is concerned. These inconsistencies can be from the level of meetings that Sabbatical officers or students are invited to, the access to pre-meeting reading or the support from departments in engaging and encouraging student rep commitment and engagement.

## **Student outcomes**

### **Academic Misconduct and Appeals**

Academic misconduct has grown since 2020/21 and whilst the Union have been supportive and understanding of resource restraints and accepting of assurances that mechanisms are going to be put in place, both the officer team and advice service colleagues are growing increasingly concerned about students that are waiting for academic conduct outcomes. The Union Advice Service has seen a massive increase in engagement levels when it comes to

academic conduct matters, going from 11 cases in 18/19 to 295 in 20/21, numbers continue to be high.

These engagement stats highlight that there is work to be done to ensure Brunel students have the knowledge and skills to produce work with academic integrity. Whilst interim measures are now in place, the accelerated procedure has been in place this academic year, but we are still seeing many students that are distressed by the length of time it is taking to consider their case.

The union does understand why conduct cases are dealt with in the order they are received to ensure fairness, but it should also be acknowledged that international students are disproportionately impacted in comparison to home/EU students when it comes to delays in conduct and appeals outcomes.

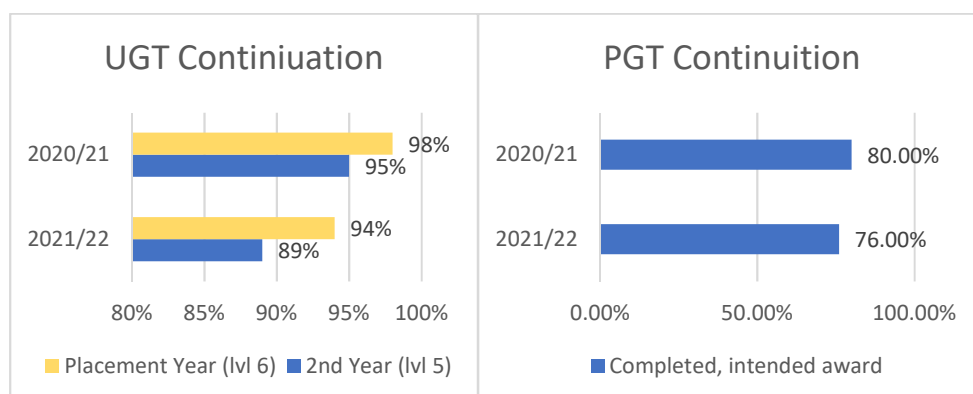
Whilst the University has obligations to meet in terms of sponsorship, there is also an obligation associated to duty of care of Brunel students, taking their individual circumstances into account; being told to return home in an already highly stressful time, not only presents students with financial consequences but has a severe impact on their wellbeing. The Union appreciates that cases are investigated upon request, but a more formal agreement needs to be considered to ensure our international student population are not disadvantaged in comparison to other students in the Brunel community.

The Union is currently working with college staff and the OSCCA team to review how international students are dealt with when it comes to conduct and appeals, by either prioritising their cases or allowing discretion around touch points/status whilst investigations are ongoing to enable them to remain in the UK until an outcome is known.

As with academic misconduct, the officer team and advice service are growing increasingly concerned about the timeframes associated with academic appeal outcomes. Whilst the Union have been supportive and understanding of resource restraints within the OSCCA team, staff resource continues to be an issue that is not being resolved.

The Union Advice Service has engaged with 103 students (as of 10/11/22) concerning academic conduct matters and 229 students about academic appeals since the beginning of the academic year, by far the two topics students engage with us about most frequently. In Term 1 of 22/23 the A 677.

## Student Outcomes





While continuation data shows the number of students progressing between years it fails to account for the number of students who come close to dropping out or failing to progress and our experience through our reps, advice service and survey data suggests that large numbers of students come very close to failing to progress. Moreover, their experiences at University are significantly harmed by the stressful experiences they endure as they approach the possibility of failing to complete their year/course.

Anecdotally the reasons for students dropping out are more often than not financial. Just as we get through the other side and back to a new normal, Brunel students now find themselves facing even more challenging times. Financial challenges students face when it comes to managing money at university is not a new thing and this year, as the UK faces the [cost of living crisis](#), we are likely to see financial struggles among students on a scale that we hoped to never see.

Since Money Doctors (a University and Union collaboration) ended a few years ago, there has been a gap in money advice available to Brunel students. Whilst this may not have been a massive issue over the years, there appears to be a real need for additional support around money management to support our students at a time of real need.

The student support and welfare team does provide some light touch budgeting and students have access to black bullion, but the reality is the demand on the student support and welfare team has increased considerably and budgeting matters are not considered high priority (compared to a student in crisis). Both the Union and University Hardship funds often act as a lifeline to our students in need, but students should not be reliant on accessing funds, as the funds are limited.

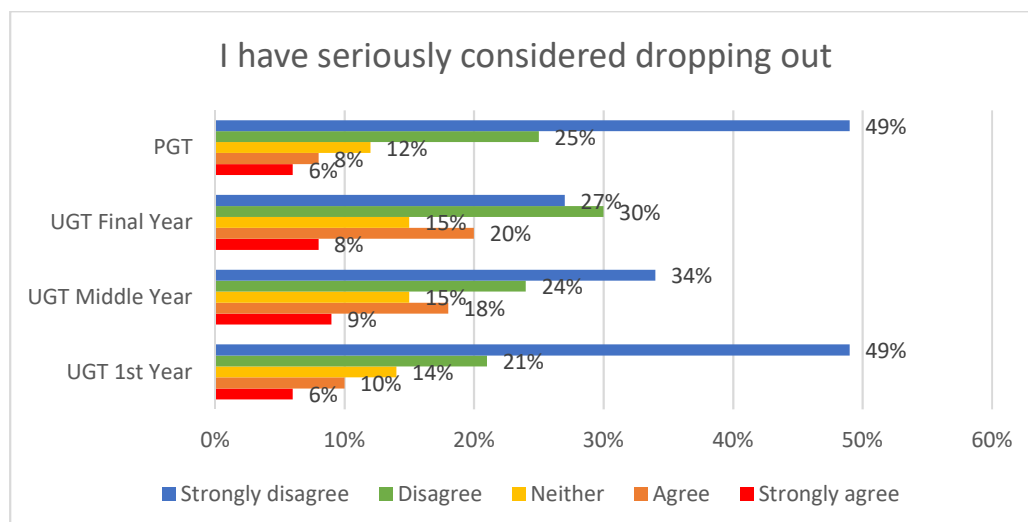
Proactive work is needed to ensure our students have the tools available to them to make the right decisions when it comes to money management, and this should start at the admissions stages. The University are very good at selling the experience and veer away from anything that could be perceived as negative at admissions stages.

This is the most worried the Union has been about the financial situation students are facing even in comparison to the pandemic. Students were neglected throughout the pandemic and it appears that treatment continues with the cost-of-living crisis. We know that most students are struggling to bridge this gap and it's not fair in this climate for the government to 'expect' parents to contribute such a high amount.

The Office for National Statistics recently ran a survey. The aim of this survey is to understand the impact of the rising cost of living on the experiences of higher education students. The stats found are as followed:

- More than three-quarters (77%) of students were concerned that the rising cost of living may affect how well they do in their studies, and more than a third (34%) of students reported they are now less likely to do further study after their course has completed.
- Nearly one in five (18%) students said they had considered moving back to their family home and commuting to their university from there, with 6% of all students planning to do so.
- The average level of life satisfaction among higher education students (5.9) was significantly lower than the adult population in Great Britain (6.8).
- Around 45% of students reported their mental health and well-being had worsened since the start of the autumn term 2022.

The Union would like to work closely with the University and be a part of conversation to review and plan how the University are going to support students, there is a particular need to review bursaries and scholarships to consider what could be done differently taking the above into account.



While data (gathered from the Students Union 360 survey) focussing on students self-reporting helps create a more complete picture it may well underestimate the true scale of the issue and doesn't highlight the various impacts on students' mental and physical wellbeing caused by the possibility of them not completing.

This is countered by two things: the work of the SU and the University to support these students and the positive results students see when they do graduate. Students have a range of options in terms of mental health support, that includes mental health advisors who can meet with students in need regularly and assist them with managing their studies as well as a personal tutor system. Students who have disabilities are able to create support profile, which enables them to access all the support, help with moving deadlines, etc. Brunel also provides limited in time counselling to offer immediate support. These have had some success in preventing students from dropping out or failing hence the discrepancy between those who have seriously considered dropping out and the actual totals.