

Section One: Approach to Evidence Gathering

Aston University Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) Student Written Submission has been conducted by the Vice President Education (VPE) of Aston Students' Union (ASU).

Who is involved?

The VPE leads ASU on all things related to the academic experience. They attend – and often chair – key meetings within the University that affect how teaching and learning works at Aston University and are a main point of contact for Student Representation. Therefore, the VPE is the correct individual to lead the writing, research, and submission of this report.

A panel was created to preview and provide feedback on the final report and its drafts. The panel was made up of the Students' Union Executive, made up of Full and Part Time student officers. Member of staff at the students' union also provided comments and edits on the final version.

The University have offered support in the writing of the submission but have not been overly influential in what has been written and have respected our independence. ASU have also had oversight of the University's submission to ensure it is a true representation of the academic experience at Aston.

Who has provided pre-existing information?

For this report, pre-existing data has been requested from Aston University Library, Learning and Development Centre (LDC) (mentoring scheme), Careers + Placement (CP), ASU Advice and Representation Centre (ARC) and ASU Voice team. Data details of what was requested is in Table 1:

Table 1

Department	Data Request
Aston University Library	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Comparison of students visiting the library
Aston Learning and Development Centre (LDC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• How many students have requested support (in all areas)
Careers + Placement (CP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Number of events and employers they have for the past four years – graduation jobs
ASU Advice and Representation Centre (ARC)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Annual reports on student advice cases
ASU Voice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Speak Weak questionnaire results from 2019-2022 (questionnaire distributed from VPE to all Aston students)• Student Representatives data
Students' Union	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Annual satisfaction Survey 2019-2022

Table 1: Pre-existing departments, data requests and format data has been presented

Extra evidence-gathering

Further information was researched by:

1. Asking our Student Representatives for general feedback, the scheme is managed via a MS Teams channel with 300 reps on channel
2. Using the online transcripts from Union Senate meetings (where senior university staff are quizzed and questioned by students' reps – attendance is usually around 100)
3. Access to and use of the NSS Results for Aston University¹
4. The Speak Week Survey for 2022 was written with the TEF submission in mind. 584 students completed the survey over a three-week period in November
5. Knowledge of the Students' Union own annual satisfaction surveys
6. Informal conversation with students and student reps about their academic experience

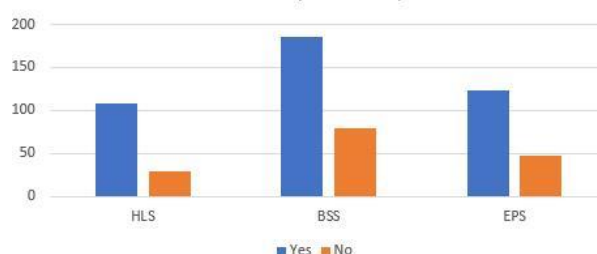
Section Two: Student Experience

Teaching on my course

In 2020, COVID-19 had a huge impact on students with Aston University pivoting to an online learning approach during that period. Aston University reacted quickly during the pandemic, and this minimised any academic disruption for students. Towards the end of the pandemic the Students' Union, using the Speak Week Campaign and report completed by 2020-2021 VP Education, mentioned that students would prefer more on-campus activities and seminars - this was reported to University Learning and Teaching Committee (ULTC), and the decision was made to introduce blended learning in the 2021 academic year, this means an increase of in person teaching alongside continuation of the online elements that in previous survey students prefer such as lectures.

Based on the Speak Week data collected in 2022-2023, over 70% out of 572 students benefited from online learning and over half of the students who completed this questionnaire find blended learning useful and insightful – this implies students believe the University is getting the balance right with regards to online and in-person teaching

Do you still benefit from online teaching? (100% online, for example online lectures and/or tutorials/seminars).



Graph 1

A further example of how the University responded positively to student needs during the pandemic was in January 2022 with the current and sudden increase in Covid cases due to the new Omicron variant. A previous decision had been made to bring more in-person teaching and assessment back on campus for the January 2022 exams. Over the closed winter vacation and on return in January the concern around Omicron and its rate of infection meant students were concerned with the notion of having to come onto campus for their assessments. The students used their collective voice to create online petition² and liaised

¹ [NSS data: provider-level - Office for Students](#)

² [Petition · Aston University Exams Online For All Years · Change.org](#) & [Petition · Aston University Year 2/3 Exams Online · Change.org](#)

with the students' union to effectively lobby the University and change their position. By the end of the first week back, and before any exams had started, the University put students first and pivoted their position, moving all relevant assessments online.

Assessment Feedback

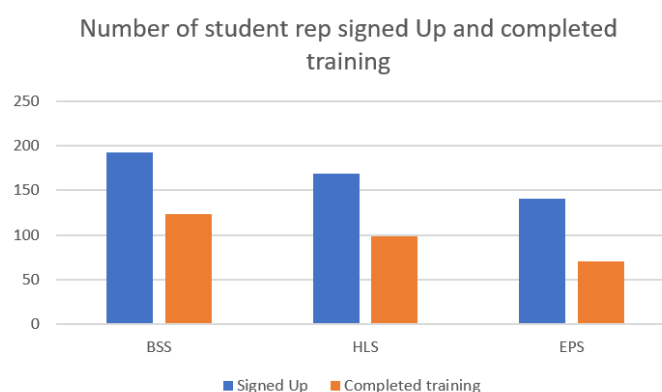
Based on NSS survey results students at Aston are satisfied with their academic experience, with the University being above the national benchmark for the last few years. Working collaboratively, the Students' Union and University, identified Assessment & Feedback as one area where the University should prioritise further improvements. To improve on this aspect of teaching, and to also give students a further avenue to have their voice and ideas heard, Aston University introduced Mid-module feedback in 2021-2022 academic year, allowing students to feedback earlier and providing the lecturer the opportunity to improve their approach in real time. The mid-module feedback project was a joint effort between the University and Students' Union and was designed by the VPE 2021-2022 with Pro Vice-Chancellor Education and Associate Deans Education.

Student Representation Framework

In 2022, the student representative (student rep) framework was reviewed and updated, to ensure consistency across the colleges. Students can apply to become a student rep whenever they want throughout their academic year. Self-nomination, coupled with mandatory attendance at training, makes them a rep – they are not elected to the roles as was the case before 2018. The barrier was removed to increase student engagement and increase the diversity of reps. The statistics support these outcomes with an increase in the number of reps and their demographic make-up largely reflecting that of the diverse student population at Aston. Furthermore, students receive recognition on their Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR).

Other changes in recent years have included splitting the different kinds of reps into:

1. Course Representatives for courses - collect feedback from their cohort and feedback to Student and Staff Committee (SSC)
2. School and College level representatives - will attend College Learning and Teaching Committee, this will allow students to understand the process of making change and make sure that appropriate action has been taken in response to the issues raised by course reps
3. School representatives are for Undergraduate students and postgraduate taught students and College Representatives are for Postgraduate Research students.



Graph 2 Student Reps Training

At the top end of the representative structure is Union Senate – all reps are invited to attend and can hold to account the University senior leadership team (Deputy VC, Pro VCs and Heads of key Student Services – IT, Library, Wellbeing). The meeting has developed over the last few years and benefitted from an online approach. At the most recent meeting in November 2022 139 people attended. No question is too small or too big and gives the relevant university staff an opportunity to understand how their policies are being implemented on the front line. This is a great opportunity for student feedback as to how supportive their learning environment is and how suitable the physical and virtual learning resources are for the academic experience.

Regular University Meetings and Project Groups

Aston University meets the Students' Union monthly. This is between the Deputy VC Engagement and Pro VC Education and full-time students' officers and the SUs CEO. This allows Aston University to understand what is really going on for students, it is used as a support network and sounding board for all stakeholders. Furthermore, the VPE and President hold regular catch ups (every two weeks) with different senior management staff in Aston University such as Vice Chancellor, Pro Vice-Chancellor Education and Deputy Vice-Chancellor Engagement. The President of the Students' Union maintains a role on University Council and meets regularly with the external Chair, to ensure the student voice is heard at the very top of the University decision-making structure.

Within the University's Teaching and Learning Committee governance structure all committees have at least one student officer or representative. For example, VPE attends University Learning and Teaching Committee (ULTC) which discusses issues such as mid-module questionnaires, student charter, complaints. The ULTC ASU VPE attends, sub-committees such as Regulations, , Programme Approval and Development, Student Experience and the Digital Pedagogies Sub-committee.

Student Experience sub-committee meets monthly between key officers and staff at the Students' Union and all the Student Support Services Department Heads at the University, to make sure the student experience is at the forefront of decision making. This committee played a key role in the pandemic, for example it as highlighted how difficult and time consuming it could be to access the hardship fund. The University took swift action and amended the process and made clear the criteria within which students could access the support fund. The approach was a proactive one with the University reaching out via text messages, encouraging those students it understood would benefit from the fund, to apply. A total of 2267 students received £400 for laptops and an additional £100 per student to pay for internet access charges where students were on low household incomes (<£25K pa)., with the funding provided by the University, the Alumni network, and additional funds from the Office for Students. The Student Experience Sub-committee has also been used to amend the Student Charter, develop a new Student Complaints process and feedback on the difficulties of securing a traditional placement during the pandemic, which then led to a new more flexible approach to placements. This committee is a positive example of how well the university engages with its students, leading to improvements to their experiences and outcomes.

This collection of formal and informal channels for student feedback and voice is a key factor in Aston performing significantly better than the benchmark for the student voice set of questions in the NSS.

The Students' Union Building

In 2019 the Students' Union moved to a new building, this was a fantastic upgrade from the previous space, that was no longer fit for purpose for a diverse student population. Multi-functional and multi-faceted it is well used by students and won the HE Inspiring Building of the Year Guardian Award in 2020. For example during the exams period the meeting spaces become revision spaces. From a Student Voice perspective the new spaces have raised the expectations from our members about what a good students' union should look and feel like and this has also been extended to how we run our services, whether clubs or societies or Student Reps. Since the building opened Question 26 of the NSS survey, asking students about the SU ability to represent their academic interests has increased from 49% to a best-ever of 57%. The building was opened by Sir Dominic Cadbury, and the investment in the new Students' Union building was £7.8m.

During lockdown the students' union building was used to host a local charity who ran a food bank service on behalf of the City Council, this was established by the then VP Welfare working with relevant staff from university Student Services.

Academic Societies

A key part of the students' union ecosystem is its student-led and run societies. These provide invaluable opportunities to meet new friends, discover new talents and find a genuine sense of belonging at the University. Academic Societies make up the single largest category of societies; these are either directly or closely aligned to an academic course and with 45 such societies each student has, in theory, a group they can join³. Students' Union analysis from 2021 demonstrates that a well-run academic society, can have a positive impact on University NSS score, particularly around a sense of academic community. Furthermore in the case of the Mathletes Society, support the students own academic learning.

Placement Year	Adjusted Cohorts	Compulsory Cohort	Undergraduates placed	Placed Overseas	Overall placed incl pre-reg
2012/13	1815		918	266	1169
2013/14	1838		948	319	1237
2014/15	1716		1040	261.5	1260
2015/16	2036		1187	330	1444
2016/17	2242		1284	320.5	1543
2017/18	2651		1632	389	1911
2018/19	2674		1663	341.5	1920
2019/20	2591	928	1599	315.5	1919
2020/21	2,491	986	1300	105	1610
2021/22	2,793	1,118	1482	170	1802

³ [Clubs and Societies \(astonsu.com\)](https://www.astonsu.com/clubs-and-societies)

Academic Support - Careers and Placement

A key part of the Aston experience for all students is the employability prospects and placement year. According to the University website, *“Careers and Placement supports Aston University students with professional and friendly advice throughout their time at and up to three years after they graduate”*. 65% undergraduate students do a placement year, this could be work, study, volunteer placement or since the pandemic - a mix of all three. They help students develop the skills and experience they need to choose the right career path and stand out in a competitive job market. The latest

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Table 2

Graduate Outcomes data is 79.6% of 1st degree graduates in a positive destination as per the Sunday Times league table – Aston outperforms almost every other University in this regard. Aston students expect to move onto better things once they have graduated and have ranked the University #12 in the country for support for employability, they received⁴

The Students' Unions impact on graduate employability is significant with many students gaining additional skills through their extracurricular activities and opportunities organised and facilitated by the students' union. Up to 25 differing activities are 'accredited' as part of the Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR). Moreover the Students' Union building has often been used as a venue for Careers fairs and events.

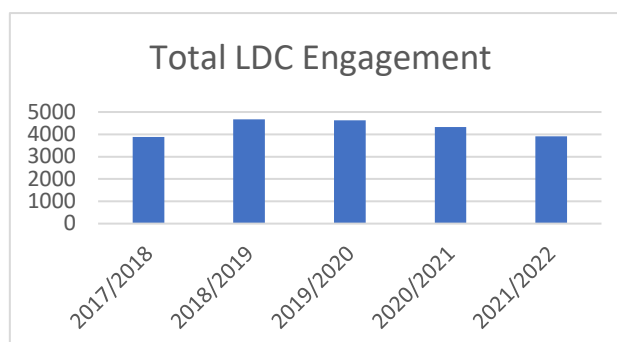
Every year, Careers and Placement organised many events to support students and their employability. They worked particularly hard during Covid to maintain the same level of support for students, pivoting their face-to-face appointments to online and introducing a more flexible placement model, allowing a more blended and 'pick n mix' approach to what a suitable placement experience means for students – much of this was driven by student needs and voice. The VP Education raised the issue via various focus groups, from the then College of Business and Social Sciences (BSS) to highlight how the traditional placement model was too difficult to implement in the pandemic.

Academic Support - Learning Development Centre

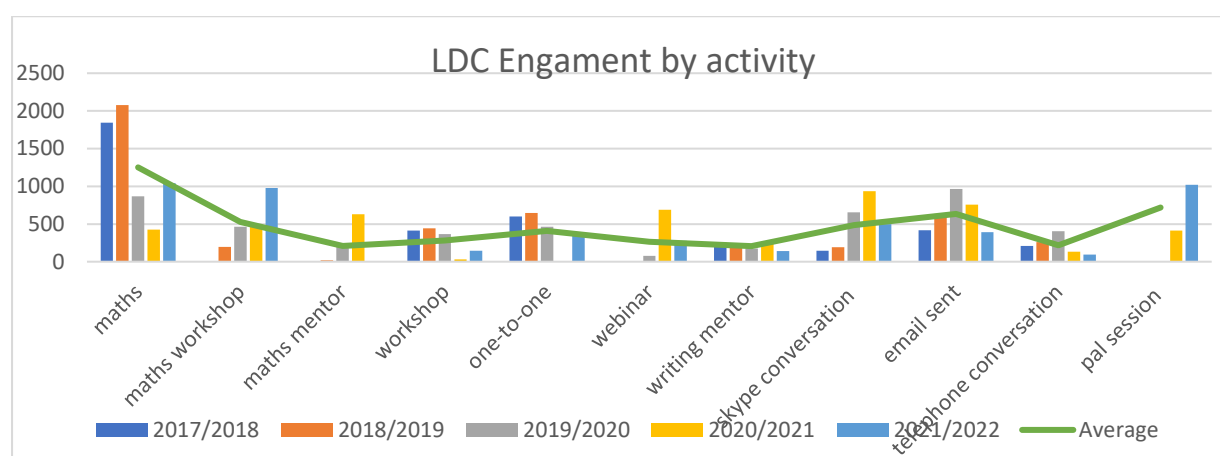
The Learning Development Centre (LDC) helps students through their time at university by providing support for key academic skills such as maths and academic writing. The LDC also offers a variety of sector leading mentoring programmes supporting students to engage in the Aston student community while expanding their networks and developing their transferable skills. Feedback from students who engage with the LDC is always positive, the staff team genuinely have the students interests at heart and want to help them to succeed in their degree programmes

⁴ [Aston University ranked #12 for Best UK University for Job Prospects based on student reviews | Aston University](#)

The COVID pandemic precipitated a shift in delivery for LDC activities and services, leading to a rise in focused maths workshops (rather than maths drop-in appointments), as well as an increase in online appointments for academic writing and study support, and an increase in email tutorials.



Graph 3



Graph 4

Academic Support – Student Welfare and Disability Support

The University has a wide range of further support services for students, from bespoke counselling and wellbeing staff members and those staff members whose sole purpose it is to support students with a disability to thrive at university. The students' union has a close working relationship with the various teams and their staff members and overall receives positive feedback from students about the services provided. One example of a partnership was during the pandemic when the Students' Union and Head of Counselling established from scratch a service that made phone calls to as many students as possible during lock down to check on students, to simply ask how they were doing and what more could anyone do at the University to support them. During the project student volunteers made over 5000 calls with around 10% referral rate to other services at the University and always positive feedback from those who were called.

Academic Support Peer Mentoring Programmes

LDC peer mentoring programmes – offering pastoral support and advice at every stage of a students' course - have also been shown to impact positively on the continuation rates of both mentors and mentees (Chart 5), pointing to the value of such initiatives in helping students remain on their programme and have a more fulfilling educational experience. LDC peer mentoring programmes have also been shown to improve student progression to the next stage of their course (Chart 6).

The LDC plays an important role in the support for the Students' Union run International Buddy Scheme⁵; helping to pair up home and international students to learn from each other and support each other. The LDC, as the central hub for mentoring on campus, helps to match and train the students. When the scheme was launched in 2019 it had around 30 members, by 2021-2022 over 450 were signed up and it continues to grow.

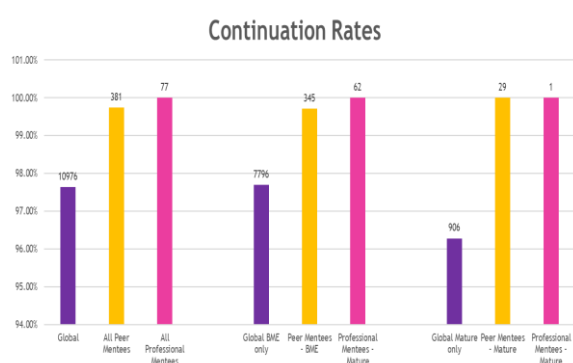


Chart 5

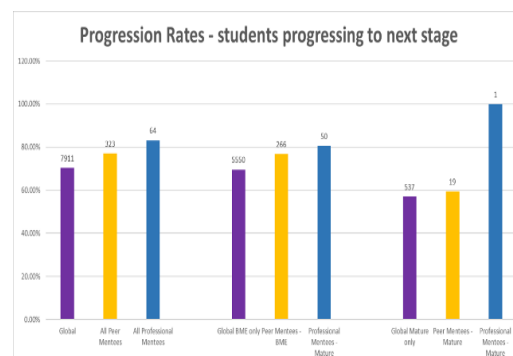


Chart 6

Academic Support - Library

The Library at Aston University is one of the key buildings on campus. With most of the on-campus academic activity taking place in the main building, the library has evolved into a central hub for all students to meet and learn and is one of the busiest places on campus each day. The library has group and silent study areas and a coffee shop on the ground floor. Online library services and resources can be accessed via the library website. A virtual learning environment allows 24/7 access to course materials, lectures, and updates, and to connect with fellow students. There is also free printing available for students to use (following a successful campaign by the students' union in 2018). Aston University is committed to sustainability and encourages students not to print if it is not needed.

Table 3 demonstrates the number of students visited the library between 2018 and 2022. There is a significant decrease and variation in 2019-2020 this is due to COVID. During the pandemic they operated a book collection service, digitisation and postal

	Total visits per academic year	Average visits per day during term (excl. vacation)
2018-2019	785,448	2,327
2019-2020	565,374	1,616
2020-2021	150,212	524
2021-2022	405,340	1,461

Table 3

service, cancellation of any fines etc. Although COVID still had an impact during 2021-2022, there was an increase of usage of the library during that period.

The student body is particularly pleased with the number of eBooks now available. This was partly driven by the pandemic, but also in response to student study patterns before 2020 – this has given access to core e-textbooks for all students. The pilot programme had been delivered in partnership with a leading publisher and provided online access to approximately 7000 titles on an unlimited basis over the course of the pilot. The textbooks were linked to

⁵ <https://www.astonsu.com/activities/volunteering/internationalbuddyscheme/>

module reading lists via Blackboard and accesses made available through Library SmartSearch. Library Services had sought to balance access to high usage, high demand programmes, with provision enabling access to smaller specialist programme cohorts.

Academic Support – IT Facilities

Over the last few years students have benefited from significant investment into the IT and digital services, particularly on crucial items as improved Wi-Fi across campus. Further facilities include: 1,500+ PCs, 180 loanable laptops, Wi-Fi study spaces and specialist software. The Students' Union receives virtually no negative feedback about the quality of the IT hardware and software available to students. The University has recently invested in a new platform to improve student support with regards to Digital Services - this is known as the Solve platform - a genuine customer relationship management platform, evolved from the old email-based system of asking for support.

Virtual Learning Education

Blackboard has been used as the Virtual learning platform (VLE) for teaching and where all course and module resources are found and accessed. Aston University launched an Aston template for all lecturers to follow, to standardise module appearances across the whole Blackboard system. This allows students to be able to use the learning materials in a more efficient manner and was applied to all modules in September 2020.

The consistent approach is designed to enable students to access key information in a straightforward way. This includes clear information about Aston Expectations, links to 'how to' technical details about using Blackboard tools and features, and additional guidance about the application of Blackboard in supporting students and managing learning, teaching and assessment activities. In addition to university requirements, College and School requirements and guidelines have been made available. Student feedback has suggested that since the template has been introduced the Blackboard experience has been improving for students.

Study space

The Students' Union Speak Week survey and report of 2019 and 2021 clearly demonstrated students felt there was a lack of study space on campus. This was an issue taken up by the students' union and in 2020 Aston University has repurposed a ground floor area into the new study space. Students were involved in the design of the study area during the whole project management process.

The scheme includes formal and informal individual and group workspaces, group working areas with AV provision, designed to allow for 24/7 access.

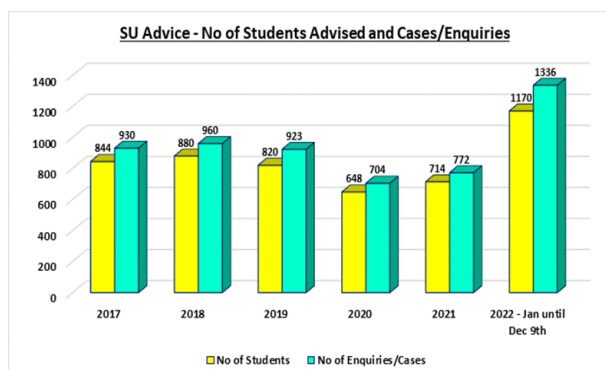
Aston Students' Union Student Advice

Aston Students' Union has a professional Advice Service that provides free, independent, confidential, and impartial advice to all Aston University students regarding their student experience. This includes



academic advice and representation for students wishing to appeal decisions (including against withdrawal), make complaints, apply for deferrals and extensions due to exceptional circumstances, and respond to misconduct related issues.

Graph 7 shows the number of students advised and cases breakdown in a calendar year, the dip in cases in 2020 is partly due to the 'no-detriment' policy the University introduced, following lobbying by the students' union as a response to the pandemic; no student would be at a disadvantage due to Covid, this resulted in less students having to access the services with regards to appeals or to support mitigating circumstances.



Graph 7

Celebrating Success; the Academic Awards.

Each year the students' union recognises the amazing work that takes place across the campus with regards to the academic experience⁶. Students Representatives receive awards for their contribution to the student voice and academic and support staff receive awards (as nominated by students) as appreciation for all they do. The Awards themselves are the pinnacle of the partnership between the Students' Union and University, in particular their Education Department, as staff and students collaborate, as members of the judging panels, to determine who wins what award. We work together all year to improve the academic experience and the event is a great way to end the year, celebrate together and recognises the genuine partnership between the Students' Union and University. [Academic Awards \(astonsu.com\)](https://astonsu.com).



⁶ [Academic Awards \(astonsu.com\)](https://astonsu.com)