

Oxford University Student TEF Submission

Approach to Evidence-gathering

1. This submission aims to give a balanced overview of the Oxford student experience based on feedback gathered from a number of sources, including formal surveys, an informal SU survey conducted specifically for this submission, engagement with the academic representation systems, University and College committee participation and general discussions with fellow students.

2. We have benefitted from collaboration on both TEF submissions (from Oxford University and Oxford SU). The SU had a representative (the Vice President for Access and Academic Affairs – a sabbatical officer) on the University's TEF working group and was given access to the data used for the main university submission. They thus contributed to the main university draft, and conversely shared their working draft with the University. There was no pressure placed on the SU to create a submission or any attempt to undermine the independence of the student submission at any point in its creation. Advice was only given by the university in order to ensure the accuracy and readability of the report. The University also give significant support to the SU in the data analysis of our survey.

3. Owing to the fact that the Students' Union (SU) was able to access various collections of data on student attitudes, chiefly the Student Barometer Survey (up to 2021) and NSS results, it was decided that further evidence for the student submission should supplement the existing data as opposed to replicating it. Oxford SU has held a long-term boycott of the National Student Survey, which contributes to the fact that Oxford's NSS response rate has been consistently below the publication threshold of 50%, hence the Student Barometer results between 2018 and 2021 have been used as a point of reference and comparison in this report.

4. A survey was distributed via email to all undergraduate students between mid-November and December 2022, of which 785 responded (equalling a 6% response rate). First year students were over-represented in the response set, comprising 377 (48% of responses). 191 second year students and 151 third year students responded (24% and 19% respectively), leaving 50 fourth year and 16 students who responded 'other' (the latter category almost exclusively being Medicine students). 125 students belonged to Social Sciences, 269 to Humanities, 208 to Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences and 128 to Medical Sciences on a divisional level (in addition to 47 Continuing Education students and 8 'other' responses).

This sample is representative of the divisional composition of students at the University:

Division	Survey Respondents	UG Population
Continuing Education	6.0%	6.6%
Humanities	34.6%	31.7%
MPLS	26.8%	30.5%
MSD	16.5%	14.3%
SSD	16.1%	16.9%

The survey comprised of ten core experience questions covering key aspects of study, with answers based on a 5-point rating scale:

- Q1. I have a manageable workload
- Q2. My tutorials / classes are engaging and interesting
- Q3. Lectures are useful and / or interesting
- Q4. I tend to receive feedback for my work in good time
- Q5. I feel prepared for assessments and exams
- Q6. I understand the marking criteria for assessed work
- Q7. My course is well organised
- Q8. I am happy with the way I am assessed
- Q9. I feel comfortable talking to my personal tutor about my progress
- Q10. I enjoy studying my degree

Students also had the opportunity via three additional free-form questions to provide their reflections on:

- what they considered to be the top issues regarding their learning experiences,
- the positive aspects of their learning experience, and
- and further comments.

In addition, those students who have declared a disability were asked whether they felt their disability had been well accommodated for their teaching.

5. A member of the data analysis team at the university carried out analysis work on behalf of the SU, and was further able to match the respondents' data to departments of study, gender, ethnicity, domicile and declared disability status – this is included in their analysis report. However, at the individual level the SU only has visible data on the year of study, college, division of study and whether the student self-identifies as disabled.
6. The following figures represent a variety of survey response breakdowns, including a breakdown of levels of agreement with the core question (wherein Agree / Strongly Agree and Disagree / Strongly Disagree are combined) and a summary of the popularity of key words (which accrued at least 10 mentions) from the first two open comment questions which cover top issues and positive aspects respectively.

Chart 1: Levels of overall agreement with core questions

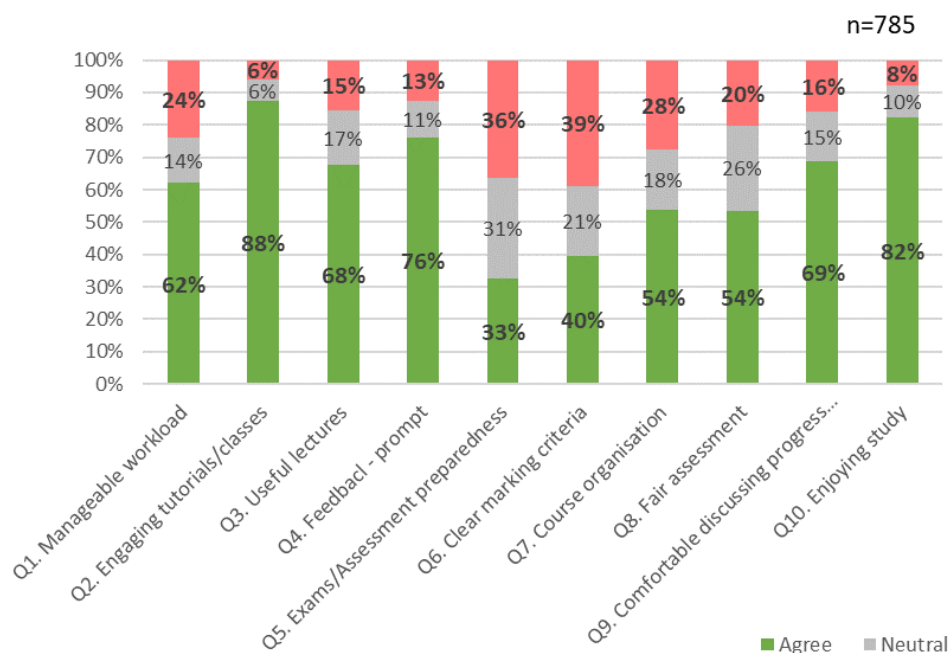


Table 1: Word count for top issues relating to learning experience

Frequency	Word
99	workload
35	disorganised
33	unaligned-teaching
26	feedback
21	lecture-quality
19	exam-prep
18	tutor-quality
18	marking-criteria
16	short-terms
16	welfare-support
16	pace
15	lecture-recording
14	exam-structure
11	lack-of-choice
10	communications
10	timetabling

Table 2: Word count for positive aspects of learning experience

Frequency	Word
227	tutorials
156	tutors
69	content
60	lectures
48	peers
48	flexibility
46	feedback
32	lecturers
29	resources
28	libraries
27	course
19	teaching
15	classes
14	skills
13	contact-hours
13	independence
12	laboratories
11	opportunities
11	manageable-workload
10	essays

7. At a more indirect level of feedback, the SU's Vice President for Access and Academic Affairs also attended forums with the divisional representatives and course representatives across Continuing Education, Social Sciences and Medical Sciences between October and December in order to gain an overview of the academic experience.

Student Experience

Teaching on Course

8. One of the main features of Oxford's undergraduate education is the tutorial system, wherein one to three students (typically) discuss their work, such as an essay or problem

sheet, that they were set a few days previously with a member of teaching staff. It is evident from the SU's academic survey that the vast majority (88%) of students believe that their tutorials and classes are engaging, and furthermore, in the free text responses to the most positive aspects of their learning experience, some reference to tutorials was easily the most common answer ('tutorials' and 'tutors' appearing in 63% of responses).

The majority of students (69%) feel comfortable discussing their academic progress with their tutor. Female respondents suggest a higher likelihood of being uncomfortable, although analysis of the SU survey suggests that the relationship is determined by factors outside of key student characteristics.

Inevitably, Oxford's teaching system is designed to encourage students to take an independent approach to studying by working through reading lists and lectures before being challenged on their understanding in tutorials and seminars. There is also variation within the tutorial system in that the experience is in part dependent upon the direction of the tutor. This can be a positive experience, as tutors will teach to their areas of particular research expertise or otherwise tailor the term's work to the interests of the student. However, some responses to the SU's survey did note that not all tutors approach tutorials in the same way, with varying levels of opportunity for students to engage in a challenging conversation to stretch their understanding and address gaps in understanding from their self-directed study. That being said, it should be noted that the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) offers courses on enhancing the teaching skills of academic staff with the aim of greater inclusivity and accessibility; the university is not negligent in its efforts to promote excellent teaching standards.

9. Another noteworthy aspect of the Oxford undergraduate experience is the high workload and short, intensive 8 week terms. Inevitably, there is not one universal response amongst the student body as to whether this is a positive or negative; it can be an opportunity for students to thrive under rigorous academic pressure, but students can also find this difficult to handle. According to the SU's academic survey, 62% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they had a manageable workload. On the other hand, 24% of students disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement. The issue was also the most commented on in the free text responses to top issues in students' learning experiences; there is a strong sense amongst students, albeit in a minority of voices in this survey, that the intense terms do not provide the time for them to properly develop and understanding of the course whilst also prioritising their wellbeing (13 students specifically alluded to burnout and / or mental health in their responses).

Concern about workload varies considerably across different courses, with between 40% and 50% of students studying Chemistry, Law and Medicine disagreeing with SU survey question that they find their workload manageable. Females are almost more likely to express concerns over their workload with 28% disagreeing compared with 16% for males. This is largely concentrated in the Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences division, where 34% of females compared with 18% of males suggest the workload is unmanageable.

10. There is also the issue of how students who fall ill or otherwise face unforeseen incidents during their studies can find it difficult to catch up due to the rapid pace of content coverage during courses. Therefore, students often have little choice other than to suspend their

studies for a year. This is especially a concern with regards to examinations, as the lack of later resits for those who, for example, are hospitalised in an accident just prior to their assessments, means that they have no choice but to pause the completion of their degree for an entire year. The most recent External Examiners' Report for the Quality Assurance Committee also raises this as a concern.

11. The range of options which are available for students on their courses, especially in the Humanities, is outstanding. To take one example History, owing to the large number of academics in its department, is able to offer over a hundred options on its BA course. Classics also offers great scope for interdisciplinary exploration. That being said, there are fewer opportunities to take optional papers in Mathematical, Physical and Life Sciences courses, particularly in the first years of the courses.
12. There is also some scope for students, especially in Humanities and Social Sciences courses, to develop skills beyond written analysis, for example, the development of quantitative analysis skills for Social Sciences students with the Q-Step course, and likewise Quantification in History for History students.

Learning resources

13. Another key feature of the Oxford experience is the volume and quality of learning resources which are available to students. Out of 31 students who commented on library provision in the free text answers to the SU survey, 28 spoke positively about either the sheer number of libraries and reading material which they had access to, or otherwise simply how pleasant the library facilities were as a place to work in. Students have access to not only multiple libraries dedicated to particular fields (for example Law, Music, Languages) but also (generally) 24 hour libraries in each college which often have their own special collections. However, two respondents did note that, as they are remote learners with the Continuing Education department, the lack of access to physical resources can be a barrier. It should be noted that colleges do typically offer book grants for students who find that they have to purchase their own academic texts, however in the majority of cases copies of required readings will be available through the library system.
14. One of the issues to note from the SU's survey is some pockets of dissatisfaction with lecture provision. Critical responses on this (from 33 students) include a sense that the lecture series for some papers do not align with the topics covered in tutorials, rendering them less effective in providing content understanding in time for the tutorial. Furthermore, 21 students commented on lecture quality, which covered a number of concerns including clarity of explanations, level of assumed understanding and relevance to the course. However, a greater number of students (60) commented on the high quality of the lectures available to them; it would be fallacious to conclude that there was widespread concern with lecture content.

There were also technical points made about the quality of audio and video in some lecture recordings (when they are available) and the uneven uploading of lecture slides and / or handouts onto the online Canvas platform for students to access in their own time

There were fewer issues with the Canvas platform itself, with 4 out of 5 students who commented on the useability of the platform praising it, with a pervading

sense that, if anything, its capabilities for digital teaching are underutilised, for example with tests and quizzes. Arguably a small number of comments regarding Canvas demonstrates that students do not find it a source of frustration in accessing learning materials when they are available.

It is also worth noting that results from Oxford's Student Barometer survey between 2018 and 2021 indicated a satisfaction rate with lecture quality of 84%, a substantially higher rate than suggested in the SU's survey. One possible explanation for this discrepancy is the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic; the wider reliance on lecture recordings during the period of remote learning has left a lasting impact on students who now have a greater desire for accessible, online lectures.

15. However, it is important to note that the central university is actively in favour of an educational recordings policy which would address the lack of lecture recording availability. However, despite the lobbying of the SU (especially the Disabled Students' Campaign) and the efforts of the central university to encourage departments to adopt an Educational Recordings Policy where lectures are recorded, in reality this has had uneven take up.

Assessment and Feedback

16. Elsewhere in the survey, the statement with the lowest agreement rate was 'I feel prepared for assessments and exams', whilst the statement with the highest disagreement rate was 'I understand the marking criteria for assessed work' with 33% agreement and 39% disagreement respectively. This is an issue which the university has been aware of for some time and is borne out in other student surveys as a perennial issue; the Student Barometer's data shows a 68% satisfaction rate, which is in line with the Barometer's pattern of reporting higher satisfaction than the SU's survey, but nevertheless, this is the only aspect of the learning experience (other than course organisation at 79% satisfaction) to score below 80%.
17. The online OXAM platform allows students to search for past papers from as far back as 2000, and a description of assessment marking criteria is available in course handbooks. Tutors also often hold revision classes, and colleges and departments run exam preparation sessions, however, it is worth noting that these tend to commence later in the year, and as such many respondents will be unfamiliar with them (especially when the disproportionate number of first year students is considered).
18. The tutorial teaching system will tend to focus on one type of assessment during the terms, such as weekly essays which do not contribute to the final degree outcome, whilst examinations are typically (coursework aside) three hour exams held at the end of the degree. At the beginning of every term colleges hold 'collections' (mock exams) which test students on the previous term's work. These are the most common opportunities for students to become accustomed to examinations and provide a rough guide to the attainment progress the student is making. However these are the only regular opportunities for students to become accustomed to the examination format, and

19. Question 7 in the SU's survey on satisfaction with assessment was included as a result of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on examinations, as the disruption caused by the pandemic led to many examinations changing to a typed and / or open book format. Whilst some departments have opted to maintain these changes, others have returned to in person and closed book (typically 3 hour) assessments. In the most recent Undergraduate External Examiners' report from 2022, there were a number of responses across the divisions that recommended diversifying assessment types in order to develop students' skills in their subject.
20. According to the SU's survey, the organisation of courses can be a challenge. In particular, this is frequently an issue which students on joint honours courses face (and indeed, noted in their free text responses). Uneven scheduling of classes and deadlines can mean that the already intense terms are made a further challenge due to poor communication between different departments.

On the administrative side, students also expressed their frustration about the clarity of department communications and changes to courses without sufficient time to adjust. Medicine and Biomedical Sciences were particular courses which were highlighted as having this problem, with circa 50% of respondents disagreeing with the statement that they found their course is well organised.

21. More widely, some students do have concerns about how timely feedback is on their tutorial work. Irregularities over the depth of feedback from tutor to tutor (or subject to subject) were also frequently mentioned in the 'top issues' open text response question, and collectively 22 students referred to inadequate feedback for at least one or both of these reasons. On the other hand, 46 students referred to their experience of receiving feedback in a positive light, and the SU is conscious that feedback problems can often be attributed to the high workload of a particular tutor as opposed to a systemic problem.
22. Although Oxford does not offer study abroad options for most of its undergraduate courses (Modern Foreign Languages and European Law aside) in a standard 'year out' format, there are opportunities for foreign trips during the vacations at some colleges, such as where there is an established exchange partner for visiting students. In addition, the availability of travel grants (of varying amounts) from colleges allows students to undertake independent projects for the sake of enriching their understanding and appreciation of their field. With regards to on course opportunities, there is an additional cost for students who, in Biology for example, choose to undertake their fieldwork abroad, although there is financial support to mitigate any barrier that this could create. There are also more local fieldwork options, so this is by no means a required outlay.
23. There is a vast array of opportunities for students to develop super-curricular interests alongside their formal studies. These include access to public lecture series and opportunities to attend talks by researchers and academics, not only within departments but also in the college community. This collectively helps to foster the sense that undergraduates are amongst a wider, exciting academic community.

Academic Support

24. The Languages Centre offers a wide variety of languages for students and the wider community to develop or expand their skillset and, as an example, BA History of Art allows for first year students to study a tailored language course for their subject alongside their main papers. The Languages Centre also provides Academic English courses non-native English speakers to support their transition to the university.
25. Efforts by the university to bridge the gap that some students from less advantaged / state-educated backgrounds are laudable and have been received positively by students. The pre-course Opportunity Oxford bridging scheme is a two-week residential programme to help offer holders settle into their new environment and prepare for rigorous academic study. Furthermore, the Foundation Year at Lady Margaret Hall college (which will be rolled out across the university from the 2023/24 academic year) has a strong progression rate to higher education, with the majority of students progressing to an undergraduate Oxford degree.
26. The CTL has also undertaken work to map the academic support offered to undergraduates through both colleges and departments. Whilst the support is variable, there are numerous examples of excellent provision (especially in colleges with dedicated study skills advisor staff or graduate students who run individual sessions) which students can access throughout their degree. However, CTL's research in 2022 found that approximately half of the 162 students who responded to their survey believed that the main barriers to accessing support were that it wasn't subject specific enough, or otherwise they were unaware of what support there was on offer.

Student voice

27. One function of the SU is to support and monitor student academic representatives across the university, particularly the Divisional Representatives but also course / departmental representatives. The university, in tandem with the SU, has published 'Policy & Guidance on Student Engagement and Representation', which outlines expectations of how students should be integrated into decision-making forums. However, verbal feedback from Divisional Representatives suggests that the quality of adherence to this ideal standard of student representation is varied. In some divisions and departments, there are clear opportunities for students to get involved in consultations and send representatives to relevant committees, but elsewhere the SU has received reports from student representatives who feel that their presence can be tokenistic, for example when it comes to matters such as a recent decision on examination formats for the Medicine course.

Disability Support

28. The optional disability question in the SU's survey, which was answered by 171 students who also have a declared disability with the university, generally tended to indicate a positive experience with having their disability accommodated (55% of the total answers). A common positive response was that tutors are sufficiently accommodating and understanding, and also that the Disability Advisory Service has been helpful in indicating the need for relevant adjustments in individual Student Support Plans, although accessibility of certain buildings remains an issue. Again, the SU would wish to emphasise

the need for accessibility and blended learning opportunities within the university to make sure that there are no barriers for students to benefit from the resources on offer.

29. It is also worth noting that a third of respondents to this question did not believe that their disability had been sufficiently accommodated, but did not provide further explanation as to why. Some students provided a relevant response in other questions, however, with a handful (15 respondents) noting that the recommendations in their Student Support Plans were not accommodated properly, either from tutors being inflexible or lack of accessibility to lecture resources.

Continuing Education

30. Overall throughout the survey results, Continuing Education students are statistically more likely to express satisfaction or otherwise positive sentiments towards their teaching experience; every single respondent was appreciative of their learning experience in their open text responses. However, a frequent concern made by Continuing Education students in course representative meetings attended by the SU is the lack of sense of learning community which many students feel.

Student Outcomes and Progression

31. By and large, there is little to comment on regarding student outcomes that is not addressed in the university's main submission report. Student outcomes (including continuation and completion rates) are overwhelmingly positive, and we refer back to the main submission in order to avoid unnecessary repetition. There are only a couple of points that the SU wishes to highlight in relation to students' backgrounds and characteristics.
32. The vast majority (94% in the last 4 years) of students attain a 2:1 or first class degree at the end of their studies. Furthermore, only a small handful of students fail their degrees, which suggests that the vast majority of students arrive at their terminal assessments as capable and knowledgeable candidates.

There are few concerns with the standard of degree outcomes, although some minor points to note are awarding gaps (between a 2:1 and a First) which negatively impact female students, especially in Social Sciences. A BAME awarding gap for Firsts is also statistically significant in MPLS and Humanities. However, these patterns should not negate the fact that these students are still achieving a good degree outcome, and furthermore, the general male to female awarding gap had narrowed to its lowest in 12 years in 2021.

33. The SU also wishes to draw particular attention to one identifiable pattern regarding student progression, which is the lower average salary (by £1600) of state educated graduates compared to their independently educated counterparts. From the latest Graduate Outcomes Survey, it appears that the difference in independent versus state educated students going on to higher salaries is not universal, but driven by a difference in Humanities. We also note that this is ultimately a crude measure of outcome which does not account for career satisfaction, however.

Educational Gains

34. Again, there is little additional content to cover which is not addressed in the main submission. We have no notable points of contention or concern with what is stated by the university.

Conclusion

35. What Oxford is best known for, the individualised tutorial system and the rigorous academic programme can certainly be drawn out from the responses of the undergraduate students. It is also worth pointing out that our survey revealed generally high levels of satisfaction with the degrees which students have chosen to study; this is not insignificant as it highlights how many undergraduates perceive Oxford as a stimulating and interesting intellectual environment.
36. However, it would be remiss to not draw attention to the not-insignificant level of dissatisfaction that students have with their feedback and preparation for examinations. Furthermore, the university ought to prioritise addressing concerns with the provision of lectures and continue work on standardising the quality of the tutorial system with regards to timely and constructive marking of submitted work, and for departments to ensure that course organisation is realistic, and communication to students is clear and prompt.
37. It is the prerogative of this student submission to reflect students' perspectives on what it is like to study at Oxford University and note that there is inevitably at least some room for improvement in their educational experience. Nevertheless, this should be caveated with the understanding that for all of the critical points made in this report, there are examples of tutors, colleges and departments offering an excellent experience to students. Ultimately, it is difficult to not regard Oxford University as a stellar institution replete with top academic staff who are able to provide an almost-unique opportunity to give undergraduates dedicated, personalised and challenging academic guidance in tutorials and classes.