

NEWCASTLE UNIVERSITY TEACHING EXCELLENCE FRAMEWORK

STUDENT SUBMISSION

TEF STUDENT CONTACT

STUDENT SUBMISSION AUTHORS

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Newcastle University Teaching Excellence Framework Student Submission

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1.0 Introduction

Through this independently authored Student Submission, we aim to give an honest and representative account of students' perspectives on learning and teaching at Newcastle University between 2018 and 2022. By putting the student voice at the heart of our Submission, we highlight the provisions and practices that have helped students to thrive during their time at Newcastle, as well as those practices that we believe could be better.

1.1 A note on the Student Contact and authorship

The Student Contact for this Submission (the Students' Union Education Officer, 2022/23) was elected on an all-student ballot in March 2022 to represent the academic interests of all Newcastle University students. The Education Officer is the most senior representative within a campus-wide system of student volunteers that includes School Reps (students who represent their peers at the School and Faculty level) and Course Reps (students who represent their peers at the programme level). Throughout this process, the University has fully respected our autonomy as the sole authors of this independent Submission. Having shared our Submission with our University colleagues, we have identified several areas of enhancement based on our findings and look forward to these being implemented in the future. In addition, we have participated in, and been consulted on, the drafting of the University's Provider Submission.

1.2 Our approach to evidence gathering

Our data is drawn primarily from 146 annual reports of meetings between Course Reps and staff (Student–Staff Committees or SSCs), 80 School Rep termly reports, 1,985 student-authored nominations to the Students' Union Education Awards, several Students' Union surveys and student-led focus groups, as well as recent National Student Survey (NSS) data. Wherever possible, we focus on data from the 2021/22 academic year and have consulted with current School Reps from all three faculties and incorporated their feedback to ensure that the Submission is informed by the experiences of the 2022/23 cohort. To reflect the global Newcastle University student community, we have included data gathered from the NUMed Malaysia and Newcastle University in Singapore campuses in our analysis and explicitly outline when we draw upon this data in our discussion.

1.3 Structure

Our Submission is split into two sections. 'Student Experience' focuses on student perspectives of assessment and feedback, teaching, and academic support, while 'Student Outcomes' outlines student perspectives on positive outcomes and educational gains. In identifying both good practice and gaps, we hope our Submission points towards ways that Newcastle University can best support its students, now and in the future.

2.0 Student Experience

2.1 Teaching

In this section, we draw on the findings of inductive, grounded-theory analyses of the 1,985 student-authored nominations from all three faculties submitted to our Education Awards 2018–2022 (TEAs), with a particular focus on the themes emerging from the 459 nominations that we received in 2022. Examples of high-quality, informative and engaging teaching abound in recent TEAs nominations, with students emphasising the importance of lecturers' explanatory skills, as well as the provision of learning content that is clear and exciting. In terms of explanatory skills and clarity of content, we found many examples of Newcastle University staff providing depth of detail without overloading students with information; linking theory to practice; teaching by example; highlighting key points in their teaching; providing highly organised and effectively structured lectures and module materials. Nominations highlight a great diversity in teaching methods, from the effective use of humour and interactivity in lectures to the use of hybrid teaching methods. It is clear from the nominations that teaching at Newcastle can challenge and inspire students to become critical thinkers, improve their confidence, and encourage them to pursue further study and research.

Newcastle University's status as a research-intensive institution impacts on the student experience in a range of ways. In the most positive instances, we are aware of staff drawing on their research interests to inform their teaching, with some going so far as to bring it to the direct attention of their students. This not only exposes students to cutting-edge research but also creates a sense of taught students being part of a wider academic community. The following reflections from a Psychology student in 2022 illustrate this wider positive perception:

'Their lectures are evidence-based, and they talk about new and recent research that informs the practice of therapy in psychology; this is especially good as our cohort is very mixed. Some students have come straight from universities and others have come from a career in research.'

From discussions with students engaged in a recent University consultation on the shape of the academic year, we are also aware that some students attribute dissatisfactory learning experiences to a wider perception that the University prioritises research over teaching. While these impressions may sometimes only be based on a few negative experiences, we nevertheless believe that their negative impact means it is even more important to ensure that the University supports academic staff to deliver high-quality teaching. We have shared these student perspectives on research-informed teaching with senior University colleagues, and we welcome their willingness to include in the revised University Education Strategy a commitment to embed research-informed teaching across curricula wherever possible.

TEAs nominations also point towards lecturers making excellent use of the virtual learning environment Canvas to aid effective engagement with course materials by, for example, breaking recorded lectures into short segments and preloading materials so that students can schedule their learning effectively. We know from SSC reports, however, that while many lecturers use educational technologies thoughtfully, some fail to upload course materials onto Canvas in a timely fashion. We are aware through working with School Reps that some students who require lecture materials to be uploaded to Canvas 24 or 48 hours in advance, as part of their personal specific learning disability support, are not receiving these adjustments from lecturers. Similarly, while we know from both SSC reports and 2021/22 School Rep termly reports that the uptake of the lecture capture technology ReCap is generally very widespread across the University, resistance in certain Schools and Departments is resulting in inconsistencies between cohorts. It is clear from recent SSC and School Rep reports that students are concerned about how this lack of provision can make their learning less accessible and flexible than that of their University peers. Having shared these concerns with the University, we welcome their commitment to include in Newcastle's 'core inclusive offer to students' a request that module leads consider if lecture slides or outline notes being available 24–48 hours in advance will better support learning in their module. Similarly, we welcome their commitment to address gaps in ReCap provision to ensure a consistent educational and digital experience by embedding it within the University's Access and Participation Plan.

We have learned from our meetings with Heads of Schools over the past two academic years that the University is taking steps to diversify and decolonise learning and teaching in response to the Students' Union's 'Decolonise NCL' campaigns, student petitions and staff-led initiatives. We know from liaising with School Reps in 2022/23, however, that these initiatives are more established within some Schools than in others, and that some Schools struggle to contextualise these ideas within their disciplines, inevitably leading to inconsistencies in experience for students on programmes where this work is emerging. With this in mind, we welcome the University's commitment to work with faculty EDI leads to embed this work and share good practice.

In providing an account of student perspectives on teaching at Newcastle, we cannot overlook the impact of timetabling. SSC annual reports from programmes as disparate as Sociology and Chemical Engineering illustrate the negative impact of lecture clashes and back-to-back sessions on the student experience in terms of increased anxiety, confusion and fatigue. One of the current School Reps for English Literature, Language and Linguistics also identifies lectures and seminars running until 6pm as an issue, as well as large gaps between sessions raising problems for commuting students. We shared these concerns with the University and are encouraged by the fact that, as part of their ongoing academic calendar consultation, plans are in place to review the current approach to timetabling, including systems, culture and process.

2.2 Assessment and feedback

From working with students, we know how innovative and engaging assessment methods can impact positively on the student educational experience. In Philosophy, for example, students write research projects that are informed by their own academic interests, giving them space to hone their research skills and considerable time to reflect and develop before completing a final-year dissertation. In the Business School, moreover, we are aware of exams mirroring accountancy exam scenarios, thus equipping students with experience and skills for their future careers.

Similarly, within the 2022 NSS free text data, there are examples of students acknowledging the positive impact of timely, clear, and concise feedback that constructively guides them towards improvement.

Despite the existence of excellent assessment methods, however, we also know that students have consistently rated assessment and feedback low on surveys, including the NSS, where overall scores for all assessment and feedback questions have fallen year-on-year between 2018–2022. Indeed, there are over 100 negative references to assessment feedback in the 2022 NSS free text data, with respondents frequently stating that they have found feedback to be unclear, untimely, and vague, and marking criteria to be poorly explained.

It also worth pointing out that some current Newcastle students will have faced challenges during previous assessment periods that took place during lockdown. Our Newcastle and Singapore campuses both saw the introduction of online exams, 24- and 48-hour assessments, and alternative presentations, essays and reports. While many module leaders acted quickly to mitigate the impact of these changes through offering assessment clinics and setting mock online exams, we are also aware from 2020/21 SSC and School Rep reports of inconsistencies in the rollout of these changes, with measures and expectations not being communicated with enough notice and clarity. In the 2021/22 academic year, moreover, students voiced their concerns about the implications for their overall academic performance of sitting in-person exams for the first time – especially those in their final year or on accredited programmes such as Pharmacy, Law and Psychology.

In 2022, we surveyed students across all faculties on their mental health and, from the 187 responses we received, found that assessment periods were a catalyst for students to experience acute stress. Notably, students in Schools such as Arts and Cultures and Modern Languages identify uncertainty around assessment formats and deadline bunching as causes for assessment anxiety:

‘My study has caused me significant stress, especially with the constant change of examination method.’

‘Not much support with in-person exams especially since I haven’t taken any since my GCSEs four years ago.’

We raised these concerns with senior University colleagues, who have committed to work with Exam Timetabling Services to assess how to provide exam timetables as early as possible for students. We are also aware of student concerns about having the necessary resources to practise their skills with mock papers or practice exam questions. School Reps in Pharmacy reported this to their School as an issue in 2021 and welcomed the subsequent provision of resources before final exams. Schools such as Psychology, by contrast, provide alternative assessment methods that do not simply test memory but rather offer students more engaging modes of assessment.

Post-pandemic students value opportunities to receive quality feedback to inform their assessed work, and it is clear from TEAs nominations between 2018–2022 that lecturer office hours are often a highly effective way of offering tailored feedback, as well as an opportunity to build a sense of belonging and mutual respect between students and staff. Some of the current School Reps

involved in putting together this Submission have reminded us, however, that it is important not to assume that first-year undergraduate and international students will necessarily understand what is meant by 'office hours' and how they can be accessed. For this reason, we welcome initiatives by Schools such as Geography, Politics and Sociology, and English Literature, Language and Linguistics to teach the so-called 'hidden curriculum' of academic terminology and culture.

In December 2022, we surveyed our 2022/23 School Reps about what they have heard from the students in their respective schools regarding feedback. We received responses from 10 of our School Reps across the three faculties. Survey responses suggest that students find it easy to access assessment feedback through their virtual learning environment but find face-to-face feedback received in seminars and office hours more valuable and constructive. The School Rep for Biomedical, Nutritional and Sports Sciences points towards the popularity of their School's standard approach of providing students with three areas of positive feedback and three areas on which to improve and the Dental School Rep explains that students dissatisfied with the feedback that they receive can receive more.

While most survey respondents report that the feedback in their school is received in a timely fashion, some express concerns that assessment deadlines often lead to students not receiving feedback soon enough to aid their engagement with subsequent assessments. Respondents also express a desire for greater consistency in feedback practices and in the quality and quantity of feedback that they receive, and some responses point towards feedback often being generic, inconsistent and, on larger modules, less meaningful and personalised. Some responses suggest that inconsistencies in feedback have impacted students' ability to reflect and progress and for those taking in-person exams, some don't receive personal feedback; an FMS School Rep noted this is something students would want access to and feel they would benefit from. With this in mind, we would welcome a commitment from the University to increase feedback turnaround time and provide greater transparency around the marking process.

2.3 Academic support

Academic support, as it emerges from our data, encompasses student wellbeing, mental health, academic writing, digital learning, and physical learning spaces, forming a comprehensive safety net for students to contribute to their student educational experience. We also recognise that the accessibility and consistency of academic support depends upon the underpinning infrastructure of policies, logistical frameworks, people and services. In this section, we focus on three key aspects of academic support that have been richly captured in our evidence gathering: Personal Extenuating Circumstances forms (PECs); the introduction of Wellbeing Advisors within individual Schools; and Personal Tutoring.

When a student recognises that a personal extenuating circumstance is having an impact on their studies, they may complete a PEC form. This provides the ability to request an extension or Board of Examiners' consideration. The number of students requesting PECs has risen significantly in recent years to over 45,000 in 2021/22 and student experiences of the PEC system are decidedly mixed. These attitudes are reflected in the findings of a survey conducted by the 2021/22 Education Officer in Semester 1 of the 2021–2022 academic year which received 27 responses from undergraduates across all three faculties. The survey found that 52% of respondents reported valuing PECs as an essential part of their progression and continuation. The findings also pointed

towards the process being complicated, confusing and slow-moving, with some respondents reporting receiving outcomes to PEC submission five minutes before an exam or even after their assessments had taken place. Respondents also highlighted the stressfulness and impracticality of providing evidence for mental health problems considering lengthy GP waiting times. Moreover, respondents cited a lack of awareness about how to apply for a PEC, a sentiment echoed by a current School Rep who noted that the process was not covered in their induction. These negative findings are echoed in the termly reports from the 2021/22 School Reps for Geography, Politics and Sociology, and English Literature, Language and Linguistics. It would appear from both findings and our wider work with School Reps that assessment bunching and a lack of timely support is leading to students using the PEC system as a way of navigating unsupportive assessment periods.

Good personal wellbeing is crucial for an optimal educational experience and, for this reason, should be considered a facet of academic support. With this in mind, we welcomed the introduction in 2019 of Wellbeing Advisors in Schools as part of a spoke-hub model to integrate and localise preventative wellbeing support for students. Indeed, in 2021/22, School Reps from Architecture, Planning and Landscape, Geography, Politics and Sociology, and Arts and Cultures all praised Wellbeing Advisor provision as helping students with post-pandemic adjustments. In 2022, a Students' Union survey about mental health that received 184 responses found that respondents from Schools with a Wellbeing Advisor rated their School's perceived prioritisation of student mental health and wellbeing a score of 6/10, while those without access to an Advisor gave a score of 5/10. With this in mind, we welcome the University's plans to continue to develop this model.

Personal Tutors can be invaluable to students' educational experience and in developing their sense of belonging within their programme and School. When the role is exercised to its fullest, moreover, with training and staff support, students recognise it as a vital and valuable component of academic support. Termly reports reflect the positive impact that good Personal Tutors can make, with students receiving personalised academic support and guidance to deconstruct feedback, unpack jargon and find ways to progress and improve in future assessments. Other evidence, however,

points towards confusion around the Personal Tutor role, the need for Tutor training, as well as inconsistencies amongst Tutors checking in with their tutees. We know from working with current School Reps that problems with Personal Tutors persist, with some Tutors not checking in with their tutees or responding to their emails. We believe that an approach to Personal Tutoring that is more personalised, consistent and better connected to other forms of wellbeing support could catch students before they fall through the gaps. We have raised these concerns with senior University colleagues and welcome their commitment to review Personal Tutoring, including training, created in partnership with students.

3.0 Student Outcomes

The ncl+ Award forms a useful case study in how the University can support students to succeed in, and progress beyond, their studies. Produced as a partnership between the University Careers Service and the Students' Union, the ncl+ Award is a way in which students can achieve recognition and demonstrate to employers the skills they have developed in the work they do

beyond their course. As the following testimony demonstrates, the outcomes in terms of students' sense of their employability are positive:

'I really enjoyed completing the ncl+ Award, it helped me hone in on skills I hadn't realised I was gaining in my extracurriculars and allowed me to write confidently about them in job applications. I began to properly recognise the weight of the work I was doing and one of the best parts of the Award is how simple it was to complete and barely took up any of my time!'

There is also evidence of ways in which the University supports progression beyond students' studies embedded within their programmes. The Geography Student–Staff Committee Report from 2020 notes that the 'Geog Onwards and Upwards' Careers Programme was valued by students, which included extensive events and speakers tailored specifically towards Geography careers and employability. Similarly, the 2020 Economics SSC report highlights the impact of the Employability Hub in the Business School, which has received a high level of interest from students. More generally, it is clear from TEAs nominations that Newcastle students welcome localised employability initiatives and career-focused teaching.

As evidenced by Newcastle's TEF indicators, student rates of continuation and progression are encouragingly high. This semester, however, the Students' Union's Student Advice Centre has reported high levels of academic appeals, with some students seeking advice reporting that they have had their studies terminated based on failing exam-based assessments. These students attribute their poor exam performance to lacking exam experience due to the pandemic disrupting their education and a lack of preparatory support in the lead-up to post-pandemic exams.

3.1 Educational gains

The educational gain domains that the University aims to support students in achieving are academic development, personal development, readiness for the future, global and cultural contribution, and social and civic contribution. These domains have been developed in co-creation with the 2022/23 Education Officer and in consultation with the 2022/23 School Reps. Our School Reps agreed that these domains captured what an ideal university education should look like while acknowledging that they are not necessarily evenly reflected in programmes of study at present. With this in mind, we welcome the implementation of this strategy and hope that particular attention will be paid to ensure opportunities for students on all programmes in terms of social and civic contribution.

4.0 Conclusion

We have placed the student voice at the heart of this Submission. We could not have done this without the efforts of student representatives and volunteers who have completed reports, survey responses and consultations over the years, in order to voice and improve their fellow students' experiences. We would like to thank all our students, past and present, for their contributions to this Submission.

In discussing teaching, assessment and feedback, and academic support, we have demonstrated that, where the University pursues innovation and consistency, it benefits the student experience. Given that we have been working in partnership with senior University colleagues around these

issues in recent years, this comes as no surprise. With this in mind, we welcome the actions taken by the University in response to reading our Submission to continue to improve the student educational experience. In support of these efforts, we have submitted this document and an associated action plan to both Students' Union and University governance committees. Looking further forward, we hope this Submission can provide students and staff at Newcastle University with a framework to inform and support further enhancements in the student experience in the years ahead.