

TEF 2023 Student Submission – University of Exeter

Introduction (video transcript)

Welcome to the University of Exeter! This submission has been coordinated by the Students' Guild who represent, support and champion students' experiences while studying, and our submission aims to reflect a snapshot of the student experience and student outcomes of those studying at the University of Exeter. We represent and support around 22,000 undergraduate students each year studying across a diverse range of subjects across the sciences, humanities and social sciences, including interdisciplinary and degree apprenticeship programmes.

The submission has also been developed in collaboration with representatives from Falmouth & Exeter Students' Union who represent students studying at the University of Exeter's Cornwall campuses. On the Penryn campus there is a strong, close-knit community of over 2,000 students sharing a campus with those studying from the Falmouth University, providing a unique learning and campus environment. In Truro, medical students are supported in the development of their clinical skills practice.

Every Exeter student experience is unique, but the student experiences at the University of Exeter are characterised by outstanding teaching and staff; vibrant and supportive campus learning environments; an incredible range of co-curricular opportunities; and a strong commitment to student partnership and championing student voice.

When collating our submission, the outstanding quality of teaching shone through, with a real focus on teaching that supports students' learning and positively challenges students academically. Exeter's teaching is also characterised by passionate and engaging academic staff that inspire students in their learning and throughout their studies.

The high-quality teaching experience is enhanced by the vibrant and supportive campus learning environments that enable students to engage both within and beyond the classroom. The positive role of the campuses in the student educational experience was consistently highlighted by students as a core part of what makes their University of Exeter experience, whether you're studying at our Penryn, Truro, St Luke's or Streatham campus.

It's not just what happens in the classroom that shapes the educational experience, and at the University of Exeter the vast array of co-curricular opportunities such as academic societies, our Give It a Go programme, Grand Challenges initiative and many more, all provide incredible opportunities for students to develop their skills alongside building a sense of belonging and community that helps students to thrive in their studies and beyond.

Obviously, there are always going to be areas where the student experience can be improved, and as the President of the Students' Guild it has been fantastic to see the passion and commitment across the entire University for championing the student voice and responding positively and proactively to areas highlighted by students for development.

Student voice is characterised by a strong partnership approach between the University, Students' Guild and Students' Union to ensure those studying at Exeter have the best possible experience. Students are involved in decision making at every level and this culture is embedded through initiatives such as Students as Change Agents, and the development of a Student Experience Framework that is centred upon partnership and co-creation.

So hopefully this gives you a brief glimpse into what it's like to study at the University of Exeter. Our written submission aims to provide you a more in-depth understanding of the student educational experience through more direct feedback and evidence from our students and gives more information about some of the great initiatives and best practice mentioned throughout this video.

1. Approach to evidence gathering

This submission has been coordinated by the President of the Students' Guild within their role as the TEF Student Contact for the University of Exeter. The President is one of four elected full-time officers within the Students' Guild (the Guild) whose role is to represent and champion the voices of students at the University of Exeter.

This submission has been written in collaboration with representatives from Falmouth & Exeter Students' Union (the SU), who represent students at the University of Exeter's Cornwall campuses and work closely with the Guild to represent all University of Exeter students.

To inform the contents of this submission, data from a variety of evidence sources was collated and analysed to ensure the experiences and outcomes for Exeter students have been appropriately represented. Analysis was undertaken using data software to help identify positive and negative correlations in the free-text comments available. Sources are listed in the table below.

| Data source | Research overview |
|--|--|
| Teaching Award Nominations | Student nominations received as part of the 2022 Teaching Awards for members of staff who have gone above and beyond for students. |
| Belonging Survey | A national survey conducted in partnership with external organisations Wonkhe and Pearson exploring student belonging and inclusion. 176 responses from Exeter students were analysed. Students on social science courses (64%), female students (65%) and first-year students (56%) are overrepresented against the overall student population, while students declaring a disability (13%) are underrepresented. |
| Widening Participation Survey | A mixed-form qualitative and quantitative survey run by the Guild aimed at students from widening participation backgrounds as part of ongoing work to support these students. 51 responses were analysed. |
| Student–Staff Liaison Committee (SSLC) Minutes | SSLC minutes collated from the 2021/22 academic year which reflect discussions between student representatives and academic staff in relation to the academic experience at course and subject level. Analysed 1,852 comments that pertained to relevant Student Experience or Outcomes themes. Representative of all courses. |
| University Pulse Survey | <p>During the COVID-19 pandemic, the University ran seven 'pulse surveys' between October 2020 and November 2021. This submission focused on the survey responses from the 2021/22 academic year.</p> <p>The three pulse surveys analysed (September, October and November 2021) were sent to 23,954 undergraduate students and received response rates of between 5.1% and 12.2%.</p> |
| National Student Survey (NSS) | Quantitative and qualitative data from the 2022 NSS exercise pertaining to the University of Exeter was analysed, which included 3,573 responses to the survey and 3,169 free-text comments. The demographic breakdown of responses is broadly in alignment with that of the wider student population. |

In addition to the sources listed above, further work was undertaken to gather evidence in relation to thematic areas of student experience and student outcomes covered by the TEF, which included collating student testimonials from a broad range of demographics to help illustrate the narrative throughout the submission.

The University has been supportive of the inclusion of a student submission and has provided regular and ongoing support throughout the TEF exercise. Support from the University has included briefings on the TEF exercise, submission guidance and the TEF data dashboards. The University also supported the student submission through the provision of relevant data captured about the student experience (such as the pulse surveys, NSS free-text comments and SSLC minutes), that has enabled the student submission to be truly collaborative and evidence-led in its reflection of student experiences at Exeter.

Support provided by the University in the completion of the student submission reflects the enthusiasm for and commitment to working in partnership with the Guild and the SU, further evidenced in the institution's own 2030 Strategy commitment to 'develop a sector-leading partnership with the Guild and the SU so that the student voice is at the heart of our decision making and strategic planning.'

While receiving valuable support from the University of Exeter, there was a clear and shared understanding about the importance of the student submission being independent of the University's submission and being drafted through more direct reflections on the current experiences of students studying at the University, with our submission focusing on perspectives from students studying during the 2021/22 and 2022/23 academic years.

An independent working group was established between the Guild and the SU to coordinate the evidence gathering for this exercise and to shape the final submission. Drafts of the student submission were shared with the University's TEF working group and relevant education-focused governance committees to ensure transparency, reflecting our ongoing partnership work with the University. The final student submission is the work of the Guild, the SU and students involved. The University did not unduly influence the content of the student submission.

2. Student experience

The student experience at the University is characterised by outstanding teaching that supports students' learning; passionate and engaging academic staff that inspire students in their learning and throughout their studies; and a vibrant and supportive campus learning environment that enables students to engage both within and beyond the classroom. The quotes below reflect the most common themes highlighted by students when asked to summarise what it is like to be a student at the University.

I really enjoy studying on my course. The lectures are engaging and insightful and offer a good starting point to begin exploring the topic. The readings can be the trickiest part, but where a lot of the learning happens. I really like studying on campus and find it a lovely space to spend my days. There are so many extra-curricular activities to be involved in and it feels like a vibrant student scene. Overall, I find my university experience to be really enjoyable.

BA Sociology

I really enjoy the balance I am able to achieve between my academic work and extra-curricular opportunities. The city itself is a lovely place to move away from home to for the first time and has everything you need. Having access to two campuses as a medical student means I have plenty of study alone and social spaces to meet friends.

Medicine, Third-Year Student

Being a student at the University of Exeter is great. I am doing a Film Studies degree and the tutors are very knowledgeable and insightful. Exeter also has one of the best-looking university campuses. There is plenty of nature on campus. You are also spoiled for choice when it comes to extra-curricular activities.

BA Film & Television Studies,

2.1 Academic experience and assessment

A key component of the academic experience for students at the University is the teaching provision and assessment practice. The academic experience at the University is characterised by exceptional teaching embedded across disciplines and academic staff who go above and beyond to support their students to engage, learn and develop their knowledge and skills. Students also highlight engaging and effective assessment practices, and this is an area of ongoing development where significant work is being undertaken, in collaboration with students and driven by the Guild and SU, to further improve how students engage with and succeed in their assessment practices. The following student quotes give a general reflection of how students would summarise their academic experience at the University:

I was glad to have chosen Exeter amongst other universities as I have found the quality of teaching, on the whole, very good. Staff have mostly been eager to help and very supportive. My course is well structured with lots of module choice which I appreciate as I'm able to study exactly what I want. There are a plethora of extra-curricular activities for my subject area which I constantly receive information on via email.

BA Politics with Study Abroad,

I love studying at Exeter! The course is very broad, so I learn vastly but can also choose hyper-specific modules to interest me, of which there is a brilliant and wide selection. I always feel supported by lecturers as well.

BA English, First-Year Student

Despite coming to Exeter during the midst of the pandemic, I was able to enjoy my university experience with no regrets. The teaching truly is top quality. I have excellent professional relationships with many of the lecturers who support me when needed. The assessments are also good.

Law LLB, Third-Year Student

It is clear from student feedback that there is generally high satisfaction with teaching at the institution, as evidenced within the NSS 2022 results (Year 4 in the TEF dashboard data) for the University, with the institution receiving an indicator value of 83.2%, 1.6 percentage points above benchmark. A marked improvement on student satisfaction in relation to teaching when compared to NSS 2021, which was impacted by COVID-19, and performance against benchmark continues to improve even against pre-pandemic figures. This improvement has been driven by the Guild and SU advocating on behalf of students and working in partnership with the University to continually enhance teaching provision, particularly during the pandemic.

This broadly positive assessment of teaching at the University is further evidenced in the analysis of the free-text comments received in the NSS 2022 exercise: 7.4% of all positive comments were related to course delivery, 13.8% in relation to the type and breadth of course content and 23.2% referred to teaching staff. The quality of teaching staff at the University is a recurring theme across the data reviewed as part of this submission.

The annual Teaching Awards hosted by the Guild in collaboration with the SU and the University in 2022 received 369 nominations from undergraduate students for staff under the category Outstanding Teaching. Nominations were received from students across a range of courses and reflective of students from all campuses.

The number and breadth of high-quality nominations received from students recognising outstanding teaching clearly conveys the value that students receive from their teaching and learning experiences. This is further evidenced by feedback shared by students in Student–Staff Liaison Committees (SSLCs) over the last academic year, with 216 comments about the teaching experience from across all subject areas in 2021/22 being flagged as positive or very positive using sentiment analysis.

Areas that best reflect the high quality of teaching across the breadth of the University include Biosciences (Penryn), Geography, English and Politics, with each of these departments receiving nominations for more than 12 different staff under the category Outstanding Teaching at the 2022 Teaching Awards. The distribution of nominations across multiple staff within these departments is a clear indication that outstanding and effective teaching has been embedded across multiple disciplines. The positive recognition of outstanding teaching across these subjects is further evidenced by the data within the TEF dashboard, which highlights that these subjects are all performing above benchmark in relation to 'teaching on my course'.

Prominent and recurring features of outstanding teaching highlighted by students across the 2022 Teaching Awards nominations included the enthusiasm and passion demonstrated by teaching staff in their subject disciplines (71 references), engaging and discursive teaching tailored to the topic or cohort (103 references), and students being stretched academically to develop their skills and knowledge to their fullest potential (54 references).

These features were particularly well reflected within Biosciences (Penryn), with several students commenting, across multiple award nominations, on the 'brilliant lecturing styles' and 'fun, amusing and educational lectures and [the lecturer's] love of the subject' which has inspired students 'to enjoy the module and it pushed [the student] to learn more.' Similar feedback was evident in other subject areas, such as English, where student feedback included how staff 'created an inspiring, collaborative environment during seminars.' The feedback from students in these disciplines exemplifies how they are inspired and engaged by outstanding teaching and provides clear testimony that they are being pushed to develop their knowledge and skills to their fullest potential.

It is also important to reflect on areas where students have highlighted the need for further development. One such area is in the lack of representation and diversity on some courses, in terms of lived experiences and characteristics. Evidence across SSLC minutes for the 2021/22 academic year highlighted that student representatives for Biosciences felt a lack of representation among departmental staff; English students felt there was a lack of diverse representation in the content being delivered; and students on medical courses highlighted a lack of diverse representation among patients and clinical groups.

The Guild's Belonging survey provides further evidence that diversity in the curriculum and in teaching staff is an area in which students have identified a need for further development. Our Belonging Survey found only 69% of students who responded 'agree' or 'strongly agree' with the statement, 'The content being taught on my course includes varied, diverse voices in this field'. As mentioned, however, this is an area that has been flagged by students through feedback mechanisms such as SSLCs, and minutes from those meetings reflect the constructive and supportive way the University considers and responds to feedback about the educational experience. The Guild and SU have been taking a leading role in how the University drives diversity and inclusion within the student experience. This has included student-led projects around decolonisation of the curriculum and piloting a new model of student representation in partnership with the University focused on diversity and inclusion.

Alongside teaching provision, assessment practice is a core aspect of the educational experience for students. Students across a range of disciplines at Exeter provide positive feedback regarding the overall approach to assessment and feedback. Some of the positive themes identified in relation to assessment practice include the quality of communication about assessments and how the University adapted its approach to assessments during the pandemic. Comments highlighted by respondents in the NSS 2022 feedback convey that students valued the support and flexibility demonstrated by the University around assessments during the pandemic, with particular focus on the impactful approach taken in relation to online exams and fair mitigation processes. This was an area of work in which the Guild and SU took a leading role to champion and advocate for a student focused approach that was responded to by the University proactively and in partnership, delivering a sector-leading outcome for our students.

Provider name: University of Exeter

Assessment practice is an area in which students continually highlight the need for further development, particularly with regards to aspects of assessment practice such as feedback turnaround times and bunching of deadlines that contribute detrimentally to students' stress and wellbeing. This is evidenced within the SSLC minutes for the 2021/22 academic year, where there were 664 references to assessment and feedback, with 39% being flagged as negative or very negative by sentiment analysis. The most common recurring themes include the scheduling of assessment deadlines and concerns about clashes or bunching of assessments, as well as delayed feedback and tight turnaround times between receiving feedback for a formative assessment and the submission deadline for subsequent summative assessments. The Guild and SU have championed the need for action on this and the University is taking a proactive response, as conveyed by one of our current elected officers:

As this year's elected student representative for education, I have been impressed by the level of collaboration that exists between the University and the Guild. I have had the opportunity to both take part in and steer the direction of travel for key University decisions. One example of this is the University's Assessment Reimagined project, which aims to transform the education offering at the University of Exeter and has been a great example of partnership working to respond to student feedback about assessment practices.

Vice President Education for the Students' Guild

The academic experience of students at Exeter is characterised by exceptional quality and an evident commitment by the institution to work in partnership with students to continually enhance aspects of the teaching and assessment provision in response to student feedback.

2.2 Support and student engagement

Alongside teaching and assessment provision it is also important to consider the provision of academic and employability support to ensure students can succeed in and beyond their studies; and to consider the opportunities for student engagement that enable students to contribute to the continual improvement of their experiences and outcomes.

The provision of academic and employability support at the University is characterised by exceptional support from staff across the institution and the breadth of employability opportunities available for students throughout their degree. Students also regularly highlight the role of personal tutors as an area of ongoing development alongside advice and guidance on study choices once on their course. The following quotes give a general reflection of how students would summarise the support they feel they have received so far at the University:

As a BEng Civil Engineering student, the course has been very tough as expected. However there has always been a huge amount of support from both lecturers and other people such as the Guild and wellbeing services that have helped guide me through the years.

BEng Civil Engineering, Third-Year Student

I have had good support from my subject in my course, with office hours and wonderful teaching staff who go above and beyond to give support. The History department is amazing.

BA History, Second-Year Student

Overall, it has been very good! Professors are super quick to answer any questions and go the mile to help students. There are a lot of resources if you need help, which has been super helpful looking into different careers.

International Relations and French, Third-Year International Student

Student feedback suggests that there is reasonable student satisfaction with academic support at the University, as evidenced by the NSS 2022 results (Year 4 in the TEF dashboard data), which received an indicator value of 73.3%, reflecting a performance 0.6 percentage points below benchmark but a marked improvement on student satisfaction when compared

to NSS 2021, which was impacted by COVID-19. Performance against benchmark continues to improve even against pre-pandemic performance in relation to academic support.

The support provided by staff is highlighted in feedback from students in the University's October 2021 pulse survey. Overall, in response to the statement, 'I have been able to contact staff when I needed to', 79% of respondents answered agree or strongly agree, while in response to the question 'How would you rate any support you have needed to access so far this term from academic staff?', 93% of respondents answered quite good or very good. This is reflective of high satisfaction from students when considering that this survey was undertaken during the pandemic and when many students were transitioning back to campus.

Student feedback highlights areas for further development regarding academic support, with data available within the TEF dashboard highlighting several subjects, such as History and Archaeology; Economics; and Law all performing materially below benchmark in relation to 'academic support'. These subjects all have large cohort sizes, and the Guild has been working in partnership with the University to review how best to provide support to larger cohort sizes in the future.

Advice and guidance in relation to study choices is flagged as another area for development, as evidenced in the October 2021 pulse survey where, in response to the statement, 'Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices on my course', only 58% of respondents answered agree or strongly agree, while in response to the statement, 'I have received sufficient advice and guidance in relation to my course', only 62% of respondents answered agree or strongly agree.

Personal tutors and their role in academic support also receives mixed feedback from students, with only 61% of the University's September 2021 pulse survey's respondents answering agree or strongly agree with the statement, 'I have met with my academic personal tutor (or have a meeting scheduled)'. Feedback analysed from SSLC minutes highlights recurring difficulties regarding the personal tutor system across some disciplines – including a lack of clarity regarding these roles and a lack of communication from tutors when students are seeking help. The Guild and the SU are currently working in partnership with the University to review this area. This work has included embedding student voice and considering mainstreaming best practice that already exists in some disciplines across the University, as well as looking at best practice across the sector.

Employability support available to students at the University provides a breadth of opportunities for students to engage with, and feedback across SSLC minutes broadly indicates students' satisfaction with this aspect of their educational experience. The following student quote provides a good reflection of the strengths of the employability support available at the University, and is representative of much of the feedback provided by other students:

I have enjoyed the employability sessions run in the first term alongside my Geography degree, as I feel this has been particularly relevant and useful for the stage that I am at with my career planning. The Career Zone runs many schemes, such as the Exeter Award, which I have actively engaged with such as by attending skills sessions within my first year. I have found the career panel and networking events particularly useful for thinking about the potential career pathways that I could take after having completed my undergraduate degree.

BA Geography with European Study, Second-Year Student

The opportunity for student engagement and partnership within the University is characterised by a strong understanding of the mechanisms through which to provide feedback and that students feel staff value their feedback. However, there is evidence that the University needs to improve communication and transparency around how feedback has been acted upon. The following quote gives a reflection of how students would summarise the opportunities for student feedback and to what extent they feel the University listens and acts upon feedback:

Provider name: University of Exeter

I have been involved within student voice by being a representative for my course. I feel this experience has been useful and gives me confidence that I am able to pass on information to the relevant staff members to make improvements to the course for future years, however I do not think that all feedback gets passed on to make immediate improvements which is something that could be changed.

BA Geography with European Study,

It is clear from student feedback that there is generally high satisfaction with student voice at the institution, as evidenced by the NSS 2022 results, with the institution receiving an indicator value of 69.1%, which reflects performance 3.1 percentage points above benchmark. This is a marked improvement on student satisfaction in relation to student voice when compared to NSS 2021, which was impacted by COVID-19, and performance against benchmark continues to improve even against pre-pandemic performance in relation to student voice.

There are clear and embedded opportunities for student engagement within the University, providing students with the chance to provide feedback and contribute to continual improvements to the experiences and outcomes of the student body. This is evidenced in the free-text comment analysis of NSS 2022 and reinforced by 86.18% of respondents to NSS 2022, agreeing that they have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on their course, 6.9 percentage points above the sector average. As evidenced by the data, students have a strong understanding of the mechanisms by which to provide feedback, which include a robust system of student representation at subject and department level led by the Guild and SU in partnership with the University, strong student representation across the University's governance structures – including at University Senate and Council – and initiatives such as Students as Change Agents, which empowers students to both provide feedback and shape change projects in collaboration with the staff.

Significantly fewer students felt that it was clear how student feedback on courses would be acted upon, with only 49.37% agreeing (2.31 percentage points below the sector average) with this statement in the NSS. This is supported by the analysis of the NSS 2022 free-text data, with 60% of comments regarding student voice making mention of feeling as though the University did not listen to student feedback. This is reflective that while there is a clear culture of student voice embedded within the University, an area for further development is how changes arising from student feedback can be more meaningfully communicated, which is an area the Guild and SU are working in partnership with the University to further enhance.

As evidenced by this submission, the commitment of the University to championing student voice at all levels of decision making is demonstrable, and the Guild and the SU continue to work in partnership with the University to improve aspects of student voice, such as the closing of the feedback loop. Further evidence of the value the University attributes to the student voice is demonstrated by the recent co-creation between the University, the Guild and the SU of a Student Experience Framework, aimed at embedding student voices at the heart of every decision made within the University.

3. Student outcomes

Continuation and completion are key outcomes for students in higher education, and the Guild and SU champion the role of belonging and community in ensuring students succeed in and progress from their studies. At the University of Exeter, the approach taken to student outcomes is focused on success for all and embeds belonging and inclusion through vibrant co-curricular opportunities and campus environments. The following student quotes reflect how students would summarise the community and learning environment at the University:

It's a very inclusive environment, and it is easy to find out who to talk to for any situation you encounter. The lecturers and tutors are really approachable and easy to ask questions from. There's also lots going on outside of studies, particularly for me what has been great is the abundance of music groups available.

BSc Physics, First-Year Student

Provider name: University of Exeter

Very inclusive with great work and society opportunities. A fantastic green campus with a thriving community.

Medicine, Second-Year Student

The importance the University places upon inclusion and belonging for students is strongly evidenced in investment in student initiatives, such as the Give It a Go programme delivered through the Guild that provides accessible events, activities and trips to students alongside their studies, to help them to meet other people and settle into the University experience. Initiatives like this are really valued by students – particularly international students – and epitomise the overarching approach to belonging and inclusion at the University. It is further evident within the TEF dashboard that there is broadly strong continuation and completion for students at the University, and student feedback across SSLC minutes and NSS 2022 free-text comments highlights that this is, in part, due to the co-curricular opportunities and inclusive environment embedded within the institution.

Student feedback does, however, highlight areas for further development regarding sense of belonging and academic community. In the University's October 2021 pulse survey, in response to the statement, 'I feel connected to students on my course' only 55.6% of respondents answered agree or strongly agree. This is further supported in the responses to the Guild's Belonging survey, where, in response to the statement, 'I feel a sense of a community with others on my course', only 46% of respondents answered agree or strongly agree. This data was collected during the pandemic when students were first transitioning back to on-campus learning. The Guild and SU championed the need to consider the challenges facing students as a result of the pandemic and how to rebuild belonging and community, which are so vital to strong continuation and completion rates.

The Guild and SU play a vital role alongside the University in ensuring students feel belonging on their course, particularly through the facilitation of student-led societies and event programmes. The Guild and SU have worked in partnership with the University to review initiatives and investments which seek to further enhance opportunities to build academic communities such as an investment in Student Experience Officer roles that work closely with student-led academic societies, departments and academics. These examples all reflect the embedded and partnership focused approach in place to deliver opportunities for students that strength continuation and completion rates and ensure outstanding student outcomes.

4. Conclusion

This submission provides a snapshot of the experiences and outcomes of those studying across the University of Exeter's broad range of disciplines and campuses. While acknowledging every student experience is unique, this submission highlights some of the defining aspects of the student experience and student outcomes at Exeter which are characterised by outstanding teaching and staff; vibrant and supportive campus learning environments; an incredible range of co-curricular opportunities; and a strong commitment to student partnership and championing student voices.

Throughout this submission I believe we have successfully captured the spirit of what it is to be a student at the University of Exeter. The qualities of outstanding teaching, a supportive environment to learn and be challenged, alongside excellent opportunities outside of the classroom are underpinned by the University's unequivocal commitment to uncovering and improving areas for development and empowering student voice to drive decision making. This process has been an exemplar of that commitment to empowering the student voice by working in close partnership with the Guild and the SU.

It has been a great privilege to have played a key role in this submission, as well as the overall shaping of our institutional strategy.

President of the Students' Guild