

1. Approach to evidence-gathering

Hertfordshire Students' Union (HSU) is the recognised representative body for students at the University of Hertfordshire – but more importantly, works to bring together students and staff at all levels throughout the University to transform students' lives.

The evidence gathering for this submission has been robust. Since 2020, we have conducted a number of student surveys and focus groups, all aimed at better understanding the student experience at Herts. Details of this insight can be found here: <https://hertssu.com/your-say/research/>, and the below submission will reference specific pieces of work throughout. The reports that are listed on this web page do include feedback from students outside the TEF population – therefore, the data on specific reports referenced in this submission has been reanalysed with students from within programmes considered by the TEF.

This submission does not cover students at partner institutions or degree apprentices.

2. Overview

The student experience at Herts is a positive one. Key strategic themes for the University include:

- Offering opportunity – Offer every student the opportunity to succeed, with varied and well-signposted routes into university and clear pathways through study. Support students to achieve to the best of their ability.
- Building community – A diverse and welcoming community with a global reach and a common purpose. Through communities of learning, exploration and knowledge, we celebrate diversity and share our passions.
- Embracing flexibility – Respond flexibly to the challenges and opportunities ahead. Flexible modes of study will support students to succeed and allow them to engage with a greater range of opportunities in education, extra-curricular activities and work experience.

It is the view of Hertfordshire Students' Union – and the students that we represent – that these objectives are being met through the experience offered by the University of Hertfordshire, with a commitment to teaching excellence being a core driver throughout.

Herts is lucky enough to enjoy an extremely diverse student population. HSU seeks to consider the nuances of this diversity as well as the broader student experience in this submission on behalf of the range of students we represent; therefore, this submission considers, in turn:

- The BAME student experience
- The BAME Awarding Gap and BTEC students
- The International student experience
- The Disabled student experience
- Student Academic Satisfaction – ongoing student feedback
- Student voice

3. BAME student experience

From our October 2021 Diverse Adversities report, looking at the BAME student experience at the University of Hertfordshire: <https://hertssu.com/your-say/research/reports/diverse-adversities/>. The University of Hertfordshire is a diverse university: 68.5% of our students are from a BAME background. Of those, 37.51% are Asian, 18.93% are Black, and 4.35% are from a mixed ethnic background. We also have a large International student population, with 38.96% of our students International. The diversity of our student community was spoken about positively by students

across all surveys and focus groups, and students discussed how much they appreciated and benefitted from this diversity. BAME students, and particularly BAME International students, spoke about how they decided to come to Hertfordshire at least partly because of its reputation of being a diverse university, and a desire to meet people from different backgrounds and cultures. BAME home students spoke about how their previous educational institutions were often white-dominated, and coming to Hertfordshire and seeing and meeting other students who looked like them, who had similar backgrounds and life experiences, had a positive impact on their wellbeing and belonging. It allowed them to feel more comfortable with various aspects of their identity and to feel 'at home' at the University, part of a strong community of staff and students. Students clearly valued the community of staff and students at Hertfordshire, and the friendship groups they had been able to build. Courses and cohorts were often referred to as 'family', and societies were identified as a key arena in which friendships are built and maintained outside of their course.

The level of academic support that BAME students receive, and their experience of that support, varies. Some students spoke about experiencing a positive community of staff and students and having members of academic staff who would go out of their way to support them in their learning journey. For those that did have a good experience of academic support it was clearly formative to their enjoyment of their course. One student said:

"It was one of the reasons I chose Herts because of how well, when they promote themselves, they advertise the help services. And in general, the lecturers when I met them at the open day seemed really supportive. To see that not only are there good support services, but within the faculty the lecturers are also quite helpful, I really appreciated that."

Additionally, from our Diverse Adversities report, 2021: 57% (N=325/569) of BAME students disagree that their work is marked fairly. White students were ($p = .0001$) less likely to report this, with 29% (N=62/217) disagreeing to this question. Black students were most likely to be concerned about the fairness of marking, with more than 3 in 5 (62%, N=63/102) Black students disagreeing to this question. Some International BAME students reported feeling that lecturers deliberately marked them down to force them to have to retake the course, and thus spend more in course fees to the university. Students spoke about how being marked unfairly not only impacted them academically, but also had a large negative impact on their wellbeing. This was further evidenced within the NSS 2022, with 72.52% of White students viewing marking and assessments as fair, compared to 66.76% of 'All other ethnic groups combined', which is a 5.76% difference.

The University has a clear institutional commitment to address this feedback and work is being undertaken across the institution to do so. The University's [Access and Participation plan](#), [Race Equality Chartermark submission](#) and [BAME Institutional Action Plan](#), all of which were developed with significant student and Students' Union consultation, speak to a number of the recommendations made in the Diverse Adversities report, and the impact of this work is positive in terms of the UH student experience.

4. BAME Awarding Gap and BTEC students

The University's BAME awarding gap has gone from 21% in the 2018/19 academic year to 12% in the 2020/21 academic year - this is very encouraging progress. This is due to number of factors, including changes in assessments during the pandemic. These changes offered a more inclusive approach to assessment, which was welcome and obviously fruitful given the reduction in the awarding gap.

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Although there is a downward trend in the size of the gap, White students continue to outperform BAME students at all tariff levels. This gap is more marked when considering entry routes, regardless of tariff level. (* = note low sample size throughout).

From the University's [Access and Participation Plan Variation 2020-25](#):

“An internal study of good degrees against entry tariff showed that in 2017-18, in each tariff group, White students outperformed BAME students, with the gaps between White and Black students the most pronounced...Adding A-Level and BTEC qualifications indicated BTEC students received proportionally fewer good degrees than A-level students, with White students outperforming BAME students in every tariff group for both qualifications. Overall, the good degree attainment gap between White and BAME students with A-Levels was 14%, while the gap between White and BAME students with BTECs was 27%.

2017/18 A-levels		Total
BAME	% Good degrees	68%
White	% Good degrees	82%
Gap	% Good degrees	14%

2017/18 BTEC		Total
BAME	% Good degrees	43%
White	% Good degrees	70%
Gap	% Good degrees	27%

It is the opinion of the Students' Union that five years later, this gap between BAME students entering the University on a BTEC qualification and White students entering the University on a BTEC (or indeed, A-level) qualification has not been adequately addressed. It is promising to see a target in the University's APP to “Reduce the good degree attainment gap between White and BAME students with a BTEC qualification from 27% to 13.5%,” and it is also promising that a significant piece of work supporting student academic skills development has been commissioned in the 2022/23 academic year. However, there is no institutional target aimed at increasing parity of outcomes between A-level and BTEC students more generally, and moreover, HSU would welcome the development and implementation of further bespoke interventions targeted at supporting BAME BTEC students to ensure progress towards this goal aligns with the University's aspirations.

In order to further progress the University's targets of addressing awarding gaps, HSU proposes the following:

- In the last year, a return to previous examination practices has happened in small pockets across the institution, and it is recommended that this be looked at in more detail to better understand potentially negative impacts on the BAME student experience and the experience of those entering study with primarily BTEC qualifications.
- Undertake additional work to better understand the experiences of our BTEC students in order to eliminate the gaps between them and our A-level students.
- Ensure personal tutoring is tailored for individual students, understanding the support needed and considers previous educational background.

5. International student experience

From our International Student Experience research, 2022 <https://hertssu.com/your-say/research/>: In the 2021/22 academic year, the University of Hertfordshire had 16.33% International undergraduate students, totalling 2,743, hosted across a number of courses. The International

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cohort at Herts is predominantly postgraduate, so within this research we separately analysed undergraduate responses, which led to a total sample of 193 students.

Just over 74.5% of undergraduate international students rated their overall experience as 'Excellent' (32.1%) or 'Good' (42.5%). The vast majority of international students who studied here during Covid restrictions were slightly more dissatisfied than home students due to the amount of online learning and inability to use all of the institution's facilities. One student reported:

'I enjoyed being a part of this university during the past 4 years. However, online teaching that had to be introduced due to...Covid 19 brought a lot of negative feelings about my student life. I do not understand why I had to pay the same price of the fees when I was not using most of the facilities at the university.'

International experience during the pandemic: 56% of these students believed that the University of Hertfordshire catered to the needs of international students throughout the Covid period. This feedback primarily relates to financial hardship this demographic of student were disproportionately affected by. The bulk of negative comments from international students regarding their time at University of Hertfordshire relates about the cost of tuition fees during the pandemic, where face-to-face teaching was not possible. International students were 12% more likely to have struggled with financial stability compared to Home students (Covid-19 Student Experience Survey, <https://hertssu.com/your-say/research/reports/covid-19-impact/>).

International experience in cost of living crisis: During Covid, over 35% of international students reported struggling to afford costs directly related to their course, and in 2022, that figure has risen to over 61% of international students reporting they have been negatively by the Cost of Living Crisis, which has, and will continue to have an impact on their learning experience (Student Academic Satisfaction Survey, November 2022). The University has recognised the impact of the increased costs of living on the student academic experience, and has increased student hardship funding by £1 million in the 2022/23 academic year, which is extremely positive. Of this, more than £450,000 is available for international students to access (£125,000 is ringfenced for international students, with a further pot of £325,000 that both home and international students can apply for), which is a significant uplift on previous years.

International students and academic support: International students are primarily satisfied with access to academic skills support, with 73.6% satisfied and just 6.7% dissatisfied (19.7% neither nor satisfied/dissatisfied). The University has acted quickly in responding to different needs around academic support, including an external consultancy in order to enhance this further.

International students and assessment: Within our Student Academic Satisfaction Survey (November 2022), international students were less confident of their work being marked fairly. 8.83% of international students did not believe their work is marked fairly, compared to 5.07% of home students. Much of this due to the communication of how assessments are marked and ratified not being clear enough, as well as enhancing the feedback. 14.1% of this same sample did not understand why they achieved the grade they did, adding to the previous point.

HSU believe that the overall student experience has improved significantly since the Covid pandemic, which was a particularly difficult period for our international students. UH has taken a particularly robust approach to the return to face-to-face teaching (with some blended elements still in place) and this has been met positively by students, particularly the University's international community.

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HSU believe there are a few key areas that will further enhance the international student experience and we are pleased to see that these are all in train already:

- An enhanced induction period for international students, embedding clear understanding and expectations of assessments and communication of assessment marking and ratification process
- Ongoing financial hardship support for both home and international students
- Review and additional communication of academic skills support available

6. Disabled student experience

From our Disabled Student Experience Report, 2022: <https://hertssu.com/your-say/research/reports/disabled-students-experience-survey/> Approximately 11% of the student population at the University of Hertfordshire identifies as having a disability. Interestingly, fewer than 2% of the University's overseas students identify as having disabilities – it is currently unknown as to why that is the case.

There are a number of support mechanisms the University puts in place to support students with disabilities, and a commonly utilised one is Study Needs Agreements SNAs. From the University's [website](#):

“A study needs agreement (SNA) is the document we use to record information about your disability and the type of support and adjustments you need for your studies. Your disability adviser will write this document with you to ensure you are happy with its content.”

We interviewed 168 undergraduate students about SNAs and key findings were:

- 69% said that the university respected their accommodations, with individuals in the focus group frequently describing teachers as “helpful”, “understanding” and “easy to talk to.” This is an extremely positive finding.
- However, there is still room for improvement for these students' experiences, with students with a SNA reporting several issues, including the need to remind teachers to implement adjustments online, and disclosure requirements that cause delays in the reporting process, meaning that visiting lecturers may not be aware of students on their course with a SNA.
- Students also reported confidence issues relating to group work assignments, especially in groups involving students without SNAs. In this case, students felt reasonable adjustments were hard to implement and experienced feelings of imposter syndrome, guilt, and anxiety, partly due to the fear of disclosing their disability or disabilities to peers.
- Alongside to issues of confidence, many students claimed that they wouldn't know who to go to if they needed to file a complaint or seek academic support, revealing a significant awareness gap.

Confidence in our student population declaring a disability is an ongoing theme. From the University's Educational Gains Survey 2022 measuring confidence levels in a variety of markers of educational gain, disabled students have reported lower levels of confidence in a variety of markers, including employability skills, personal development growth and skills development. This is particularly notable as the 2020/21 academic year showed no gap in differences in outcomes, which is an extremely positive development, and reflective of the University's commitment to support students with disabilities.

It is the opinion of HSU that this confidence can be increased via two recommendations:

- For academic and support staff to coordinate together to ensure SNAs are developed in a realistic manner and adjustments are properly understood and able to be delivered in order that students can feel confident in their development as their time at university goes on
- Ensure there is targeted work through Personal tutors aimed at increasing the confidence of students with disabilities

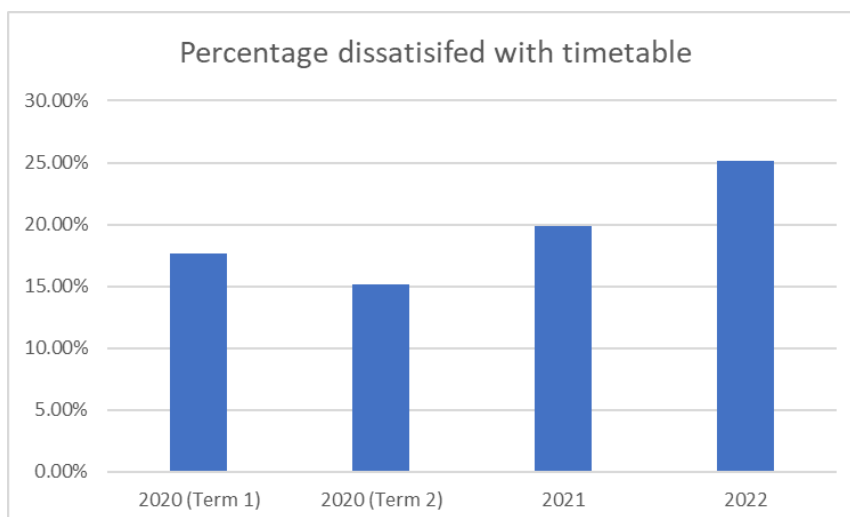
The University has shown a clear commitment to eliminating the gaps in non-continuation between students declaring a disability and students declaring a mental health condition or a social or communication disorder via their Access and Participation Plan

(https://www.herts.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0018/360711/Access-and-Participation-Plan-2020-25-Variation.pdf) – the 2020/21 academic year showed no gap in differences in outcomes, which is a positive development. We believe the recommendations we have made above will only further support these positive outcomes.

7. Student Academic Satisfaction – ongoing student feedback

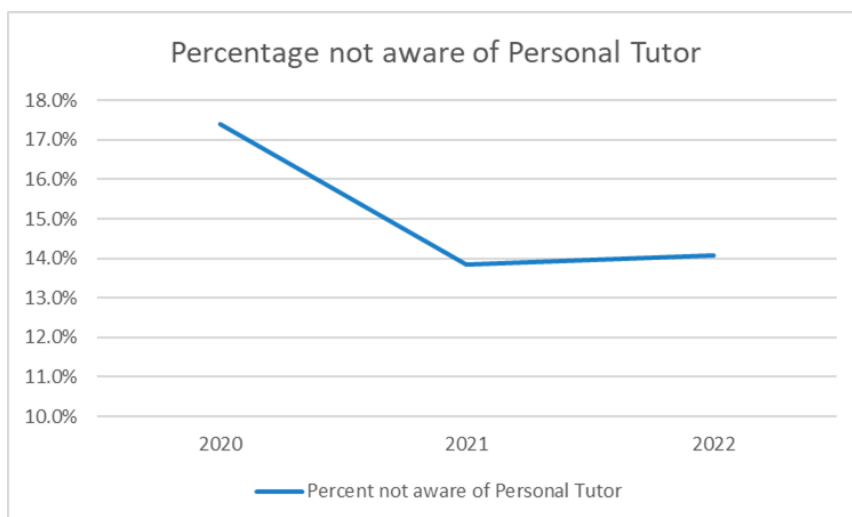
HSU has run annual academic satisfaction research for the past three years. Consistently across these pieces of research (<https://hertssu.com/your-say/research/>), a total of 3,945 UG students offered feedback around three reoccurring themes: timetabling, personal tutoring and assessment.

Timetabling: (see graph below) across these pieces of research has created an average of 19.44% of students disagreeing that their timetable works efficiently, or just short of 1 in 5. The highest percentage being 25.11% in the most recent November 2022, and the lowest being 15.13% in March 2021. This continues to be a challenging issue to resolve, due to a diverse student population experiencing a variety of factors impacting their learning experience, including, placements, caring responsibilities, part-time study and high numbers of commuting students. This is echoed in the University's NSS 2022 results for the question on timetabling, with 17.1% of students disagreeing that their timetable worked effectively for them. Very positively, the University has demonstrated a commitment to resolve these issues through the ongoing monitoring of timetable success metrics (co-codedigned by the University and the Students' Union and, crucially, through a commitment to investing in new timetabling technology.

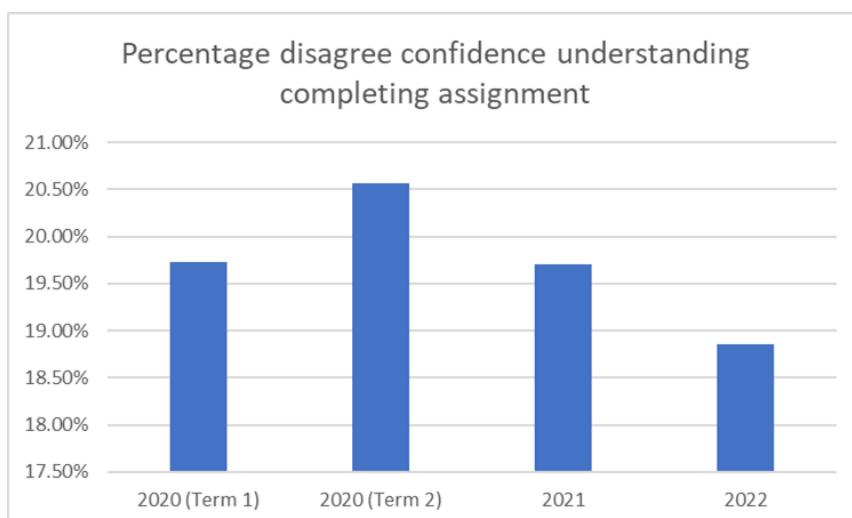


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Personal tutoring: (see graph below) has also been a regular feature in this research, with an average of 15.1% of students not being aware who their personal tutor was. It is worth noting, these percentages vary widely across the schools and are not consistently high across the board, suggesting there are implementation difficulties in schools with higher student numbers. There was an increase in the number of students who did not believe they had received academic support from their personal tutor, with a total average of 30.05%. However, this has also been a large priority for the University of Hertfordshire, which has since developed a personal tutoring framework, which has been a positive step.



Assessments: The number of students reporting a lack of confidence around understanding what is expected from them with regards to their assessments (see graph below) has been consistent across the last four years, with the average being 19.71%, the highest being 20.56%, and the lowest being 18.85%.



This correlates with student feedback around enhancing personal tutoring and academic support, and students view these areas as strongly linked, and similarly, within the NSS 2022, 10.7% of students disagreed that they have received sufficient advice and guidance in relation to their course.

There has been positive progress this academic year, with an official external review carried out to evaluate the University's study skills support for students. This review, which contains feedback from students and SU staff alike, has led to a number of key recommendations to improve the

quality and effectiveness of academic skills support, which is excellent in pockets and underdeveloped in others. These recommendations are in the process of being developed and delivered by a working group, and a commitment to senior level staff support has been made.

Although the University is progressing well in these areas, HSU believe the following recommendations would have a further impact positively on the student experience:

- The effectiveness of the personal tutoring framework should be reviewed centrally and on an annual basis to ensure it is run consistently and effectively for all demographics of students
- The timetabling success metrics to be reviewed on an annual basis and adapted in line with student feedback
- Roll out the recommendations made in the recent review of academic skills in order to develop and maintain a consistently excellent approach in embedding academic skills development into the curriculum.

8. Student voice

How the University hears and responds to the student voice plays an important role in the student experience at Hertfordshire, both from a teaching and learning perspective and a pastoral perspective. Student partnership and both formal and informal student voice mechanisms throughout the University are particularly strong, and this is evident in the University's consistently above benchmark NSS scores on the student voice questions:

Question/Section	UH Score 2022	B/mark 2022	UH Score 2021	B/mark 2021	UH Score 2020	B/mark 2020
	% agree	% agree	% agree	% agree	% agree	% agree
STUDENT VOICE	69.81	66.66	69.23	66.32	76.14	73.85
23. I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course	81.26	79.07	81.29	79.10	87.32	84.19
24. Staff value students' views and opinions about the course	71.20	68.03	71.15	67.68	77.39	75.32
25. It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted upon	56.87	52.91	55.33	52.29	63.98	62.05

There is an ongoing commitment to the student voice at all levels throughout the institution. Student leaders are supported to embed the student voice throughout the institution, offering their insight at all levels of decision-making. The commitment is reflected by our students as well – the SU enjoys very strong student engagement across an array of student voice mechanisms, including our research surveys (for which we receive 1000+ responses on average each time), the attendance we attract at student feedback forums (for which we've increased to an average of 100+ this year) and the number of Student Leaders we recruit (close to 1000 over the past year).

SU Sabbatical Officers: SU Sabbatical Officers are well-respected by the University, and the positive working relationship the SU and University have means that their feedback, thoughts and opinions are always sought out during key decision-making processes. There is a strong commitment from the University to include student representation on all committees and working groups, and they have regular meetings with the senior management more generally, and so the influence they have from a student representation perspective is both wide-ranging and highly

impactful. A recent example of this partnership working effectively is the development process the University's Academic Skills provision is currently undergoing. Student views were sought during the consultation period, and there was ongoing consultation with HSU Sabbatical Officers, senior staff and School Community Organisers throughout the development of the recommendations. This has led to a set of robust recommendations the Union believes will add even more support to the way our diversity students engage with their studies.

School Community Organisers and Student Reps: Our Reps and SCOs are essential when it comes to representing students as a whole, offering student feedback at a school level that rises through the various channels and representation structures we have. Both groups here function at the grassroots level - Student Reps in particular - collecting student feedback within Programmes and across Schools. They are then able to represent this feedback to the relevant staff via Programme Committee Meetings, and similar meetings with their Programme Leader(s) and/or Associate Dean(s), which exist primarily for the purpose of discussing students' feedback and co-creating solutions to be taken forward.

Students' educational experience also benefits at a localised level because of the work their Student Reps do to represent academic interests on individual Programmes – examples including deadline extensions, more interactive classes, and improvements to the personal tutoring system.

Strategic approach: At the more strategic level, the Pro Vice Chancellor Education and Student Experience has commissioned a piece of work aimed at bringing a more consistent approach to how the University hears and resolves issues that arise through student voice mechanisms. This work is being jointly led by senior staff from Academic Quality, Marketing and Communications, Learning and Teaching Innovation Centre and the Students' Union, features student representatives, and has led to improvements in how student feedback is shared and acted on across the institution.

9. Conclusion

From the University's TEF submission 2022:

"In conclusion, our approach to teaching excellence starts with understanding our students' experiences through the student voice heard at all levels. Through our deeply embedded partnership working, our students recognise the value of feeling part of a vibrant learning community which enhances their sense of belonging to the University and engagement with their studies. Our innovative and strongly embedded focus on employability, employer engagement, flexible and personalised routes to learning with targeted support for students where needed, has delivered outstanding outcomes for all. As a university, we are immensely proud of our achievements in 'transforming lives'."

HSU feels confident in endorsing this statement and believes that staff at all levels in the University demonstrate an ongoing commitment to student success through teaching excellence. Although the student population at Herts has changed significantly since the last TEF exercise, with large increases in international, postgraduate and commuting students, the commitment to the success of all Herts students has not changed. This is driven by an institutional ethos of being Student-Focused, a core value that is shared by the Students' Union and one that frames the University's ambitions for its students and the partnership work with the student body the institution remains committed to at all levels.