

## Wolverhampton Students' Union – Student TEF Submission

### Introduction

Our students choose to come to the University of Wolverhampton with a sense of pride, with hope to better themselves and to support their families. Many of them are the first in their family to study at university. Our students invest significantly in their education as they have high aspirations for their future. The rich diversity of our students is a tremendous strength and opportunity for the University. All students have the right to feel a “sense of belonging” which is key to building their confidence, life experiences and attainment. This submission is being put forward by  
Students Union Sabbatical Officer, Vice President - Academic.

This submission is focused on:

- An insight into our diverse student communities and their experiences.
- Hardship and well-being issues including the impact of the pandemic.
- The role of the SU to provide support to our members.
- The need for continuous improvement in University services to provide the best possible experience and outcomes for all current and future students.

### Section 1

#### Role of the SU

##### **Strategy**

In 2021, over a period of 7 months, the SU led by the Sabbatical team developed a three-year Strategic Plan which put students at the very heart of the strategy and reflects their lives and aspirations. Students helped shape a new vision, mission, and values as well as key priorities for the next 3 years which reflected the desire to build better connected student communities and a greater sense of belonging:

**Vision-** *“Proudly Wolverhampton. Inspiring and empowering all students get the best out of university and life”.*

**Values-** *Supportive, Inclusive, Brave, and Innovative*

**Strategic Themes -** *Belonging, Identity and Community, Well-Being, Opportunities and, Student Voice*

**Delivery of Student Facing Services** - The SU currently employs 35 students as well as a small core team of 16 staff who co-design with students to deliver a wide range of impactful services:

**Advice and Representation Centre (ARC)-** ARC is an independent service that offers professional, impartial, and confidential advice for students who face challenges during their academic journey. Situated as a service within Wolverhampton Students Union, the service has been awarded the Advice Quality Standard (AQS) for its robust systems and procedures. ARC was at the forefront of supporting students during the pandemic and now the cost-of-living crisis. All staff are trained in mental health first aid. Data and trends on key issues coming to ARC, including case studies are regularly shared with the University. To provide a sense of scale, ARC supported 1525 students with 1778 cases in the academic year 21-22.

**Student Voice-** Student Voice employs up to 19 Students to be School Representatives, they are responsible for working alongside both staff and students to ensure issues regarding academic aspects of student life are heard and acted upon. This is supplemented by student volunteers who

work at a course level ensuring students have an opportunity to provide feedback regarding their academic experiences. In the 21/22 academic year they supported 3,136 students.

**Societies/Opportunities-** provision of activities to promote a sense of community and belonging as well as activities to improve cohesion, confidence, and skills of students. Students Union currently has 69 societies.

**Pilot Projects-** delivery of student led pilot projects to find innovative and impactful solutions.

**Liberation Pilot Project** - a student led, community project delivered between October 2021 and June 2022 involving students who feel marginalized and identify themselves as disabled, mature, BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Colour), international, LGBTQ+ and as women. This project involved 282 students and it employed 6 student staff, one from each of the communities.

**Decolonisation Pilot Project** - a student led advocacy project delivered between January and June 2022 and involving 87 students across three academic departments (History, Sociology and Social Policy) to promote an inclusive curriculum and a better-quality student experience

### **Collaboration with the University**

SU has representatives on several University committees/working groups and 2 Sabbatical Officers (President and Academic Officer) have a seat on the University Board of Governors. Our role is to represent the interests of the students at the University of Wolverhampton. The Sabbatical Officers have recently been invited to and are currently supporting the University to develop better procedures in for example, Safeguarding, Mental Health and Well-Being Strategy and the Student Trusted Person Notification.

### **Approach to Preparing this Submission**

A Task and Finish Group was established comprising 3 Sabbatical Officers and staff members from across the Student's Union. This submission has been prepared independently of the University TEF submission.

The following methodology was adopted:

- Review of existing evidence base within the SU– see list below.
- Delivery of a new student survey specifically for TEF submission and conducted in December 2022-January 2023 - 77 undergraduate students participated.
- Data from the University of Wolverhampton on student outcomes and demographics.
- NSS 2022 data
- Feedback from each Sabbatical Officer on their experiences.
- Informal consultation and feedback from students to Sabbatical Officers.

Evidence base derived from the development of the SU Strategic Plan in 2021:

- A Student Survey report- 1,139 students participated, and it was conducted independently by Alterline during February and March 2021
- A Student Qualitative Engagement report- 46 students participated 30 through 4 focus groups and 16 in depth 1:1s- undertaken by the SU between January and March 2021
- A Stakeholder Survey Report- 92 respondents (conducted independently) by Alterline.

- SU Student Survey 2022-462 students participated and was conducted independently by Alterline during April/May 2022
- SU Impact Reports of 2020, 2021 and 2022
- Data SU from services in 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022
- Liberation Rep Pilot Project Report July Report 2022
- Decolonise Pilot Project Report July 2022
- Demographic data is available for the student surveys.

Evidence base provided by the University of Wolverhampton:

- What Works for Mature Students: a systematic oriented review of the peer reviewed literature. December 2022
- Access and Participation Plan, 2020-21 to 2024-25
- Student Outcomes Paper 2021-22
- Our Vision 2030
- Who are our students? 2021
- NSS Overview 2022
- Population Stats 2021-22

## **2 – Student Experience - #myvoicematters**

The University of Wolverhampton has a diverse student population over 20,000 students, which is made up of 54% White, 20% Black, 19% Asian, 5% Mixed. The student population includes 9.6% of international students and 46% mature students as well as a significant number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The University offers a wide range of courses and ways to study, across multiple disciplines such as foundation years, courses with placements and the ability to study part time. With the range of courses and methods of study available, it is important to consider how different individuals approach and engage with the academic experience and the different challenges they may face during their academic journey. The university experience should be viewed holistically, with an understanding that all aspects of the student experience, both at home and on campus will impact an individual's academic achievements, such as on levels of continuation, completing and progression. The many facets of university systems, services and courses must work together to support students and have to be flexible to address the diversity of the student body. With such a range of possibilities to consider it is evident that one size cannot fit all.

### **An insight into some Student Communities**

The academic experience is different for every individual who decides to embark on an academic journey, and this is especially pertinent considering the diversity of the students at Wolverhampton University. The following is an insight into some of our student communities.

#### **International**

The number of international students studying at the University of Wolverhampton is continually increasing, current figures are 1,931. As part of its 2030 strategy, the University is looking to recruit more international students. Our evidence, as gathered from informal conversations between students and Sabbatical Officers, demonstrates that international students face several challenges during their studies that home students do not. These include:

- The experience of arrival, including at times, a lack of warm welcome and orientations to support with settling in, particularly outside of standard working hours.

- Language barriers and difficulties in understanding differences in educational systems and their related regulations.
- Falling behind with tuition fees, falling into debt and having difficulties in accessing and communicating with relevant university staff to resolve matters.

As part of their services, ARC offer advice and support for students who find themselves being investigated for potential academic misconduct. In 2021-2022, 31% of academic enquiries ARC received were from international students related to academic misconduct. One student stated that: *“having misconduct issues after putting effort into your work isn’t a good experience at all and most lecturers don’t understand that it was a ‘mistake’ and should try to help students avoid this”* (international student’s feedback, to Sabbatical Officer via email.)

Another reoccurring problem international students face is issues with tuition fees. In 2021-2022, 60% of all academic issues received by ARC, from international students, related to requests for support with tuition fees. In addition, Sabbatical Officers have found that they are often contacted first by international students when these issues arise. Issues can include negotiating time to pay and trying to set up new payment plans due to changes in their circumstances while at university. ARC case studies identify difficulties international students can face on these occasions. For example, in some instances when students fall behind with their payments, due to extenuating circumstances they have been locked out of their IT accounts and therefore unable to resolve matters. Whilst addressing some tuition fee issues would be beyond the constraints of the University’s regulations, we feel their needs to be greater flexibility and opportunities to enable students to resolve these and continue in their studies. When issues such as this arise, and student feel they have little power to resolve them, their sense of belonging is negatively impacted upon.

## **Mature**

According to a report published by the House of Commons in 2021, mature students aged 21 and over made up 37% of the entrants to UK universities in 2019-2020. At the University of Wolverhampton, 46% of the full-time student population are mature students. Deciding to return to higher education as a mature student is a life changing decision and mature students face several challenges. Evidence gathered by our Liberation Representative Project found mature students concerns centred around a lack of tailored offers, mental health challenges and financial difficulties. Mature students often have children, work, or caring commitments to balance alongside their studies. The need for flexibility is crucial when it comes to supporting mature students during their academic journey. In 2021-2022, 50% of the total cases ARC dealt with, were from mature students. The most common concern was students wanting to make an academic appeal. These include instances where a student wishes to appeal a University decision such as them not being permitted to progress on their course or being discontinued. This could indicate that University regulations are not designed to respond to the changing needs of mature students and the additional support that might be required in these cases. In the responses to the SU’s TEF Student Survey Dec 2022, a mature student stated that *“In many areas mature students are being unfairly impacted, short notice, no timetable for next term”*. Another said that when seeking academic support, *“all available slots are during school runs or clash with lectures.”* Flexibility in policies, student support and timetabling which put students who are care givers needs as central to them could have a great positive impact on their sense of belonging at university. This suggestion is taken from recommendations in the University’s ‘What Works for Mature Students’ review, in December 2022.

## **Disabled**

Due to the stigma and perceptions surrounding disability, particularly mental health, it can be difficult to fully consider the challenges faced by disabled students during their academic journeys. In part, this is due to many students not feeling that they can disclose this information to the University or to their placements which creates a barrier to fostering a sense of belonging and community. For example, only 15% of ARC cases included a disclosure of a disability in 2021-2022. Furthermore, the Disabled Liberation Rep identified that the University's Attendance Policy did not consider the needs of disabled students. The University has recently started to focus on these issues and the Attendance Policy has been amended. In the SU's TEF Student Survey, Dec 2022 a student stated, *"I was able to fill out forms and speak to a member of the mental health and well-being team who regularly checks on me and sees I'm getting the support I need"*. However, based on the student voice feedback, there is still further work that needs to be done. With further reference to the SU TEF Student Survey – Dec 2022, one disabled student shared *"I have dyslexia and there isn't much help for understanding the things we are taught"*

## **Academic Experience**

In December 2022, the Wolverhampton Students' Union conducted a survey based on the Office for Students (OfS) student experience features detailed in TEF guidance for student submissions. A total of 77 undergraduate students took part in the survey. Quantitative data indicated students were overall happy with aspects such as how supportive the University was regarding their studies, how helpful the feedback students received from the academic staff regarding supporting and enhancing learning, and how engaging course content was and how it was taught. These questions scored an average of 7.44 out of 10. Several themes also emerged from the qualitative data obtained surrounding wider academic and support issues.

## **BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Colour)**

The BIPOC Liberation Representative focussed much of their work within nursing Students who defined themselves as BIPOC. The term 'Global Majority' is now used as a substitute for this acronym. Work conducted included a series of 1:1 interviews and a focus group where students were consulted. Key issues identified were that Nursing students felt, *'dejected'* and some felt *'discriminated'* during their experiences including whilst on placements. These findings have been shared with senior staff at the University who are addressing these issues. The SU Student Voice project, ARC, and the SU TEF Student Survey - Dec 2022 Survey has gathered further insight:

- The unique experience of placements in nursing is challenging for students. For example, the cost of travel and parking, and working long hours alongside academic learning.
- Dissatisfaction in the curriculum design of Mental Health Nursing. As commented upon in the SU TEF Student Survey (Dec 2022): *"I feel that the majority of the content has not really related to my chosen field of nursing, therefore this has impacted upon my learning and experience"*.

The Student's Union is currently part of a pilot project with the University called PACE (funded by OFS) to develop student led approaches to address mental health, focussing on courses including nursing.

## **Decolonise Pilot Project**

Students have taken a lead in helping to identify solutions towards establishing an inclusive

curriculum. Between January and June 2022, a pilot decolonise project was delivered. This was led by 4 students who were trained to be Advocates and they worked across 3 academic departments, History, Sociology and Social Policy. They engaged with 52 students and 9 staff through a combination of workshops, in depth interviews and a survey. Key recommendations included:

- Creation of safe space to enable students to talk openly about diversity and inclusion which will help create a better sense of belonging and build confidence.
- Focus on the development of soft skills in academic staff to help facilitate better quality discussions on inclusivity.
- Increase diversity of perspectives and materials across curriculum.
- Increase diversity of the teaching staff

The pilot was SU funded and they are currently seeking further funding to roll this out and embed the learning as part of the wider work on Inclusivity.

### **Administration and Technology**

In the SU's December 2022 survey, students raised some concerns, in free text comments, regarding several areas of their academic experience. Students highlighted issues surrounding the quality of Wi-Fi across the campus as well as the availability of software that would prove beneficial to independent study. There were also several issues highlighted by students that impact upon their academic experience. For example, their timetables not being available or showing inaccurate information. As well as this, inaccuracies in attendance data and recording. As mentioned, in many of these instances students are often unsure of where and who to go to for support with these issues and can feel they are passed between multiple services before being given clear guidance. This is further supported by the experiences they often shared with Sabbatical Officers.

### **ASK Service**

There have been significant issues identified by the SU's ARC service over consecutive years in relation to the student's experience of enrolment, progression, and getting support with academic issues as evidenced in the SU impact reports from 2019-2022. In 2022, the University established a new centralised ASK Service, a one stop shop to address such issues. Unfortunately, the Students Union has continued to hear from students about the challenges faced in getting support in reference to the ASK Service. This was raised as a concern by students during August through to October 2022 and became most evident when there were long queues of students waiting at the ASK@WLV service desk. Some students were understandably upset about the length of waiting time for a response to both in person and online enquiries.

Over the last year, the University has been undergoing a transformation process which we feel has caused additional strain on some of their services. The ASK Service appears to be an example of this as it did not have capacity to cope with student demand. During this time, the ARC service handled many cases where ASK response times were cited as an issue for the student. In the responses gathered from our SU TEF Student Survey Dec 2022, one student commented: *"I have made several phone calls, logged a help desk call and have even gone in person to the ASK team off but, have had no progress"*. Another wrote, *"I went to ASK for support who said they would investigate and call me back by a set date but, they never did."* In addition, the SU Sabbatical Officers picked up several cases and continued to raise concerns on this matter to the University for several months. Most recently the University has announced that the service will revert to a

decentralised model at the beginning of the 2023/24 academic year. Furthermore, in the last few weeks, in response to issues experienced in 2022, the University is testing new Enrolment Hubs, to improve the student experience. It is essential that the whole system supports the student experience as the inability to address wider concerns impacts negatively on the academic experience, retention, progression, and confidence of the student.

### **Mental Health and Well-being**

In March 2021, the Wolverhampton Students' Union conducted a survey to aid in the development of their strategic plan, with 1,139 students taking part. The survey found that student wellbeing is impacted in various ways including exams and assessments, academic workload, and financial concerns. In the findings of the SU's 2021-2024 Strategic Plan, 64% of students said mental health and wellbeing was a concern for them, with loneliness being a worry for 45% of students. It was also outlined that 70% of students expressed academic achievement and workload as a concern. A final statistic on wellbeing also stated that 54% of students were worried being able to pay for essentials, with 47% being concerned about levels of debt. Therefore, we feel that when implementing new policies and procedures it is important to consider the wider context and experience of students at the University of Wolverhampton to ensure their mental health does not suffer during their academic journeys.

The University recognises the impact that studying in higher education can have on an individual's mental health and well-being. They have most recently implemented the 'Support to Study Policy' and 'Trusted Person Notification Procedure' as well as launching their 'Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy' in 2022. The Wolverhampton Students' Union has collaborated on this project.

### **Hardship**

The Covid-19 Pandemic caused considerable hardship for our students, many of whom rely upon income from part-time work that was no longer available. Hardship, has of course, had a significant negative impact on the student experience. In 2020-21 ARC logged over 300 queries (50% increase from the previous year), directly relating to hardship as well as picking up hardship as a factor when addressing queries relating to the academic, well-being and other matters. international students were especially affected as they were initially excluded from the Universities own Hardship Fund.

We found that some of our students were hungry and so the SU formed partnerships with 2 local charities, one to deliver hot meals and one to deliver dry food parcels direct to students. In addition, in 2020 – 2021, the SU distributed £50 food vouchers to 128 students, at a cost of £6,400. In 2021, Sabbatical Officers successfully campaigned to get the University's Hardship Fund criteria changed to include international students and ARC helped students to access £85,554 of financial support to address hardship experienced. In the SU's Student Qualitative Engagement report, a student was quoted saying: *"The experience is making me tough, but I pray it won't break my health, if I come through this, it will help people who come behind me....I pray that you and your generations will never experience the pain of lack"*

Sadly, we are again in a difficult, challenging economic climate, the cost-of-living crisis having further negative impact on students. In response to this, the SU is gearing up to deliver more

student led solutions, such as cost-effective ingredients to make nutritional family meals with Sabbatical Officers providing the recipes.

### **Online learning**

Students were unable to physically attend university during the height of the pandemic and the University had to adopt an online learning strategy. The transition to this, as well as the on-going inability for students to be on campus impacted negatively upon their academic experience and mental health. The SU's Strategic Plan states that 60% of students reported online learning had a negative impact on the way their course was taught and 52% felt it negatively impacted their ability to do well on their course. As well as this, in the SU's Student Qualitative Engagement report, one student is quoted as saying: "Online lectures are not engaging.... Lecturers can talk about 10 slides for 5 hours, and not engage with students...". Another shared that: "University experience for me is devastating – disappointing, not engaged, isolated from everyone, shoddy mental health. Upset because of no contact with anyone." To again consider the unique impact on international students, the pandemic also played a part in intensifying some of the challenges they face. For example, overcoming language barriers and being unsure of who to approach for help.

However, it must be recognised that during the pandemic, some students did feel supported by measures put in place by the University. One student told us that, "I appreciate that the University made use of good resources and provided useful information on the website and portal to make settling into the school's system easy." Another said, "I learnt that the lecturers are there to help us and we shouldn't hesitate to make use of every opportunity accessible to us. Seizing these opportunities helped me move forward with the University a lot." (SU's TEF Student Survey Dec 2022.)

## **Section 3**

### **Student Outcomes**

Continuation, completion, and progression are important when considering student outcomes. In the data produced by the University of Wolverhampton a pattern in progression and retention between white and global majority students can be seen. This being that more white students consistently progress, and return compared to global majority students.

### **Progression**

		2018/9	2019/0	2020/1	2021/2
Overall	Global Majority	64.9%	67.5%	53.4%	57.3%
	White	76.7%	76.8%	76.7%	71.7%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>69.8%</b>	<b>70.4%</b>	<b>61.6%</b>	<b>62.8%</b>

### **Retention**

Faculty		2018/9	2019/0	2020/1	2021/2
Total	Global Majority	78.4%	77.5%	78.3%	78.6%
	White	83.7%	82.4%	83.8%	84.2%
Retention gap		-5.3%	-4.9%	-5.5%	-5.6%

### **Degree Classifications**



Percentages of first-class and second-class degrees being awarded have overall increased year on year. However, the same pattern can be seen in the degree classification awards in each of the 3 facilities.

Faculty	Ethnicity	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
FABSS	Asian	58.2%	69.3%	72.1%	61.0%
	Black	50.7%	68.6%	64.8%	57.7%
	Other	56.0%	72.5%	75.4%	60.4%
	White	71.8%	84.4%	85.6%	77.4%
FEHW	Asian	58.0%	71.1%	72.9%	65.2%
	Black	51.5%	61.0%	66.3%	49.1%
	Other	66.7%	67.7%	71.2%	67.3%
	White	78.9%	86.9%	85.0%	81.9%
FSE	Asian	64.3%	76.9%	76.2%	72.5%
	Black	50.0%	64.3%	79.2%	62.8%
	Other	64.3%	66.2%	65.9%	75.0%
	White	77.3%	85.0%	91.0%	80.7%
<b>Grand Total</b>		<b>66.7%</b>	<b>77.0%</b>	<b>79.2%</b>	<b>71.4%</b>

The Inclusivity Framework, introduced by the University is a positive step but concerns remain as to why there is a marked difference in the retentions, progression, and attainment across different student communities?

Another important aspect to consider regarding outcomes for students is what their journey is like beyond graduation? Students come to university for several reasons, one of these being to get a graduate level of employment, and for many their dream job. Therefore, key support is needed for students to go through this transition period and to prepare them for life after university. Enhancing the additional services provided by the University around careers and employability would aid in achieving this. One student, as quoted in the SU's Strategic Plan, stated: *"My course is quite broad. Many of the career workshops haven't been relevant for me... Employability support for me needs to help me get a leadership role, and the support I have received hasn't been anything I couldn't get from Google"*

The pattern of disparity continues in the employment outcomes for different student communities. The University's Graduate Outcomes Survey reported to the University's Student Experience Committee in November 2022, states that Global Majority graduates have significantly lower levels of highly skilled employment outcomes than White students. For example, at undergraduate level in 19/20, only 36% of Asian students were in highly skilled employment compared to 52% of white students.

### **Looking forward**

We are proud of being students at Wolverhampton, the University of Opportunity and we are proud of our beautiful, rich, and diverse student communities. Every student pays for and has the right to the best student experience possible. Whilst acknowledging recent progress, we believe that a holistic approach is needed that recognises and fully understands students' backgrounds as one size does not fit all. We must be brave, work together to find effective solutions. There is challenging and exciting journey ahead of us and we are ready to play our part.

## Transcript for Supporting Sabbatical Officer Video

Presenter 1 – Hi I am [redacted] I'm the President of Wolverhampton Students' Union

Presenter 2 – Hi my name is [redacted], I am Vice President Academic Officer

Presenter 3 – Hi, my name is [redacted], I am the Vice President Community and Welfare Officer. Collectively we would like to express how excited we are to be a part of the TEF submission for the very first time.

Presenter 1 – We would like to start, by giving you an insight to our personal student experience.

[redacted]. However, I did feel disappointed with my university experience overall. I didn't think it was worth the £9250 fee that we have to pay annually, and I struggled to find a sense of belonging.

Presenter 2 – I felt welcomed when I first arrived at the University, but things changed quickly in pandemic it took longer than expected to respond to my queries by the University, during and after Covid. Overall, I was dissatisfied with my university experience.

Presenter 3 – The support of my family who were previous students was a huge aspect of my smooth journey. Without them I would have felt deprived of a clear direction and help that I was expecting from the University.

Presenter 1 – Now I would like to give you an insight to what it is like to work as a Sabbatical Officer at the University of Wolverhampton. As sabbatical officers, we do work alongside many people both staff and students and given the platform we are given the opportunity to raise issues and concerns within the student body. However there have been times where we have felt like our voices are not being heard whilst sat alongside University staff. The frustration of this has many a times lead us to feel upset and not appreciate fully how much of a blessing this job has been for us and for students.

Presenter 2 – Now we look to the future. We are in a period of significant change as the University is putting a variety of new structures to support students such as enrolment and induction hubs. Moving forward we hope to see significant improvement in the student journey and experience as we build a stronger partnership together.

Presenter 3 – We hope you enjoy our submission. Thankyou.