

Approach to evidence-gathering

The SU student writing group

'I am delighted and honoured to have been the student lead on the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) Student submission. It was not only the input from the students that made it special but the friendships, networks that were created. Students from different worlds meeting and sharing not only academic experiences but life experiences. Because of the TEF writing workshops students that would have not crossed paths did and it created a more belonging aspect that just made it magical.' Academic Executive, 2021 & 2022.

The De Montfort Students' Union (SU) student submission has been written in collaboration between the Academic Executive, our faculty level Course Representatives (Course Rep), and our Zone and Council representatives as elected members of the student body.

We welcomed course reps from across the faculties of Health & Life Sciences, Business & Law, Computing, Engineering and Media, & Arts, Design & Humanities on a voluntary basis to a discussion workshop to collate their own experiences, and that of their cohorts. The course reps are able to offer invaluable insight on course and programme level challenges as well as successes when the feedback is actioned.

We also welcomed our Student Council to the writing group. These are elected members of SU's governance structures, working on representational interest areas including; Academic, Open [for the development of the Union], Opportunities, Welfare, and Equality & Diversity.

From across these pools, we had over 40 students in attendance, in addition to 5 Executive Officers [Sabbatical Officers] for whom the project has been a priority. The writing group include senior student leaders who collectively feed into the SU Trustee Board, and the Joint Executive Committee with University & SU leadership teams.

Writing Group Members	
Business and Law Representatives	7
Arts, Design & Humanities Representatives	3
Health & Life Sciences Representatives	19
Computing, Engineering & Media Representatives	14
Student Executive Officers	5

The SU Writing Workshop

The writing group met on the 13th September, 10th November & 15th December. They were supported by the SU's Voice Manager, Head of Membership Services & Insight Coordinator. Their role was to support in the collation of student feedback, gather data from the previous four years and generate student interest, awareness, and participation in the student submission.

Testament to the strong recent history of support and collaboration between the SU and the university, the University enabled a true student led writing approach by funding an external writing facilitator. The facilitator met with the full student & staff writing group to support a forum for discussion of feedback and voices generated by the student attendees, using the appreciative inquiry methodology and other reflective approaches to draw out common themes. To maximise this space a University expert also presented the data that the Office for Students (OfS) will use through the TEF process, giving students complete access and knowledge on the university data,

and enabling students involved to scrutinise the experience, and outcomes for students over the last four years. Throughout the writing process students were informed of the data by utilising the TEF indicators and been able to see where DMU, were ahead, on target, and below the benchmark.

Concurrently to this activity, the SU's Academic Executive Officer held a seat on the University TEF Steering Group and was able to utilise the space by conveying positive and constructive feedback from the writing workshops; actioning 'quick wins' and championing wider issues of representation through ongoing mechanisms.

In addition to the evidence collated from these bespoke TEF writing workshops, we also drew on insight and data from SU projects, Zone & Student Council minutes, Vice-Chancellor Distinguished Teaching Award nominations, University Committee Minutes, and issue-and-feedback logs from meetings with student representatives. We also utilised our annual membership insight surveys where we had the following respondents across the university:

- 1) Business and Law (BAL) 362, 32.85%
- 2) Health and Life Sciences (HLS) 310, 28.13%
- 3) Computing, Engineering and Media (CEM) 251, 22.78%
- 4) Art, Design and Humanities (ADH) 179, 16.24%

The independence of this report is safeguarded by being truly student-led, and you will hear from a variety of students. Evidence has been driven by documented representation activity in formal spaces and 'in corridor' as well as data from SU engagement with student activity. In this sense, we hope to have created a 'holistic overview' of experiences that evidence the areas of excellence that DMU's students have experienced and co-created, and a greater understanding of any issues.

We are proud to present to you the range of voices of DMU's student representatives, we have authentically captured the essence of being a student at DMU, whilst acknowledging the differences and discrepancies in the experiences of students at DMU.

Students' voices are embedded within process at DMU, commonly being the centring point for their creation. DMU students have benefited from co-creating the University's strategy, which has also shaped the organisation of this submission.

Student Experience

Co-creating the DMU Experience: Strategy

The University has been rebuilding its relationship with both staff and students, after having been put upon enhanced monitoring by the (OfS) in 2019 based on governance and leadership, resulting in the resignation of the former Vice-Chancellor and Board of Governors and adversely affecting student experience. Through this continuation of positive working relationship, the SU's elected executive officers have been able to have a greater impact on the student experience at DMU and we see this directly through the increase engagement with the Executive Officer Election from students which in 2022 saw a total of 3,133 students casting 23,465 votes in total across the 5 Executive Officer roles, and 6 Liberation Officer roles with candidacies. This was an increase in comparison to 1,828 voters in 2020-21 and also up on 2019-2020 in which turnout stood at 2,935.

The University, with support of the SU, is continuing to work to redress the impact of this, which has manifested as a variability in the student experience. We recognise the decline over recent years as noted in the University submission, and in working together we're seeing some green shoots of recovery in the 2022 NSS results. A key component of this new partnership approach was the re-imagining of the Student Charter, where the Academic Executive (2019 & 2020) led the new student charter group bringing together members, the SU, and the university in true collaboration and seeing students as the centre point of the institution. This paved the way for the whole organisation to see students as leaders and co-creators.

DMU is now an institution which prides itself on 'learning for life' and in 2021 proactively sought the engagement of its students co-creating its strategy. On April 1st 2021, The Vice-Chancellor (Professor Katie Normington) was welcomed to the SU Student Council to consult on University strategy. The 29 elected members of Student Council who represent the wider student body that were in attendance, were invited to discuss their priorities and vision for the future of DMU. Specifically, students were asked about what prospective students of DMU would want, and in response raised inclusion & welcome, advanced industry links and consistent empathetic teaching delivery as key themes:

"To feel included and welcomed into an environment, regardless of race, disabilities, gender etc. And to feel supported with mental health. Understanding staff that provide different forms of learning materials and communications". (Student Council Member, April 2021)

"More uniform way of teaching. All lecturers teach in the same way so there's fluidity" (Student Council Member, April 2021)

Council representatives were also asked to nominate and rate values in order of the influence they should have:

- 1) *Sustainability*
- 2) *Focus on Equality & Diversity*
- 3) *Community Outreach*
- 4) *Reducing Black, Asian & Minority Ethnic awarding gap*
- 5) *Industry leading research*

(Student Council, April 2021)

The actioning of this feedback is evidenced throughout and across the University's strategy, which is woven throughout this submission.

Co-creating the DMU Experience: Joint Executive Committee

The student voice plays a vital role within the University and students are co-creators and co-leads in the university experience and are embedded throughout different mechanisms, meetings and spaces, from informal conversation to regular Faculty Student Voice Committees to university Boards. An example of the impact of this ethos can be found in the University and Students' Union Joint Executive Committee (JEC). In this space, such changes improvements in the distributing of university timetabling are raised. As such, students have been able to raise and articulate the impact of the timetabling process to the university and to the SU via a regular mechanism – JEC meets once a term. In this matter, students will receive their academic timetable earlier to be able effectively to plan their studies around part-time work, caring responsibilities and extracurricular activities. This is vitally important to the SU as this recognises the diverse needs of our members and enables them to plan effectively around their own learning. Thus, removing barriers to participation, enabling students to find their supportive communities, and work to fund their studies. The impact of this change is demonstrated through improvement in the 2022 NSS question 16 'the timetable works efficiently for me', and showcases the upward trajectory in relation to the Student Experience metrics.

JEC meets to capture the experience at regular points through the year and is Co-Chaired by the University and SU. JEC membership comprises the university executive leadership group and the SU executive office. Within this meeting both the SU and university have open conversations about improving the student experience such as the Period Poverty Campaign. The campaign identified the barrier for student in accessing sanitary products, and the negative impact this can have for students. After a successful trial of the SU providing free sanitary products within the union building the university are now also providing free sanitary products across university buildings.

Co-creating the DMU Experience: Tea & Chat with the Vice-Chancellor

The conversation between the University Senior Leadership Team and students remains open and welcoming with students at all levels, with the Vice-Chancellor meeting regularly with students throughout the year. The creation of this space is testament to the welcoming environment fostered between the SU and DMU where conversations are welcomed in both formal and informal spaces. Recently (14th November 2022), having met with 17 students via open forum on the topic of Placements & Mentoring, with further themed forums on topics such as 'Digital Transformation', 'Student Experience' and 'Student Voice'.

Co-creating the DMU Experience: Students representatives as partners in academic quality

Student presence, participation and value in University meetings is embedded into terms of reference. SU Executive Officers hold a range of duties on University committee meetings, notably with our Academic Executive Officer as co-chair of University Learning & Teaching Committee. Our Academic Executive Officer has commented that *'I am privileged and honoured to be the Deputy - Chair of the University Learning and Teaching Committee. It has given me a unique opportunity to represent student voice and be part of the process of making impactful decisions that will better student experience. It has allowed us to tackle issues like time tabling, allocations of course reps to name a few.'*

The relationship between the Department of Academic Quality and the SU is strong. Historically, Executive Officers and Student Representatives have been involved in the validation and re-

validation of programmes. In the 2020-21 academic year, the Student Voice department at the SU received feedback from involved student representatives, that *'sometimes, the student representatives' presence was seen as being enough in the room, and occasionally felt de-prioritised on the busy agenda'* (Executive Officer).

This feedback was the starting point for formal review of representative's experience of the validation process that SU and Academic Quality Officers worked on collaboratively, producing the recommendation approved at Academic Quality Committee that the team seek *'to improve the Student Panel member validation experience. This would comprise undertaking a review of the student panel member experience at devolved and non-devolved validation events, working together with the SU Executive and considering best practice from other institutions, in order to make recommendations to enhance the validation process at DMU for Student Panel members.'* Steps that have been taken so far to work towards this include the scheduling of regular experience group meetings, evaluation of training resources for Executive Officers (alongside the University Exec.) and a review of staff Chair guidance & training to reiterate the importance of student voice in these meetings. Informally, drop-in validation workshops have also been co-ordinated with the Department of Academic Quality, so that representatives can best understand the necessary paperwork in real time.

Finally, plans are now in place to widen out the training offer to course reps to both upskill and embed their understanding of academic quality, to promote further equity in knowledge with their staff partners.

The SU and its academic representatives (Course Reps) form a strong partnership with the University centrally, through holding seats at Academic Board, and also locally within Faculties. The SU and the DMU Associate Professors for Student Experience (APSE's) work collaboratively to promote and clarify the positive relationship of the University and Students' Union during induction and beyond. This year, in collaboration with the APSE's and Programme Leaders, we have been able to arrange 24 induction talks, reaching approximately 1,168 students during October induction – with an introduction to academic representation and DMU & SU's unique partnership being central to this.

The recruitment process for course reps is a joint project, led by the SU Student Voice team in partnership with Programme Leaders and APSE's. Academic staff understand and are supportive of the leading role that student representatives should have in securing and regulating academic quality and are strong advocates of empowering the voices and expertise of DMU students.

The SU Voice teams' working relationship with staff has been key to building successful engagement with and generating course reps, where links have been difficult to build (for example; due to a higher staff turnover, redundancies, or sometimes simply unable to access contact details) we have seen a lower number of course reps. During the pandemic the Voice Team from the SU supported Academics and APSE's how to support students to engage virtually and how to utilise course reps with gather feedback and talking to peers in that new landscape.

Course Representative Numbers	
HLS	162
BAL	50
CEM	106
ADH	98

This year 89% of course reps have been trained following a streamlining of training to foreground academic quality and building academic communities between students, and staff. Training focussed primarily on formal feedback avenues (for example: at Faculty Academic Committees, Programme Management Boards and Subject Academic Committee), partnering with staff to positively and proactively address concerns, and how to handle informal 'corridor' trouble shooting effectively and constructively.

Throughout the year, APSE's and Student Voice teams in the SU collaborate on hosting drop-in sessions for course reps in particular, to bring and workshop any issue or feedback they encounter, with issues raised being documented within a feedback tracker for monitoring and reporting back at the next drop-in.

One project that evidences the co-operative relationship between staff and representatives is 'Understanding Feedback' led by the Faculty of Health & Life Science in collaboration with Library Services, SU and students. Students within HLS faculty had been finding it difficult to interpret academic feedback on assessments and this was evident in NSS results, with satisfaction in assessment and feedback dropping from 68.44% in 2020 to 59.99% in 2021 despite commendations by external examiners cited in annual reports. The impact of this work is we have seen an overall increase this year of the institutional score to 65.15% this increase has been seen not only by HLS students, but across the university in receiving useful feedback.

Alongside the Academic Executive Officer, course reps were invited to co-produce a resource that aimed to establish common terms understood by students and staff and converting comments into action-based improvement plans to develop academic skills for students, in addition to training staff on action-based feedback. The research phase identified and grouped commonly used feedback terms from students and staff into emerging themes; language & grammar, assignment structure, critical analysis and argument, use of evidence.

The development of the resource resulted in an interactive tool designed around these themes, that operated like an academic dictionary, searchable terms would lead to action based micro units to explain the feedback in more detail and with suggestions for improvement. Course reps involved in development continually fed back on common misunderstood feedback terms, as well as what would be useful for the resource.

Co-creating the DMU Experience: Student led recognition of excellence

Students are involved in the identifying of excellent practice across the teaching community at DMU, formally through the Vice Chancellor Distinguished Teaching Awards (VCDTA) that was launched in 2005. DMU and SU work in tandem to promote the opportunity for the rewarding of excellence, as recognised by students via nominations. Post-COVID, students identified a disconnect between students and staff has been felt, however the natural fostering of these relationships has begun to be rebuilt that and we see an increase in the nominations of for these awards.

VCDTA Nominations	
2022	547
2021	449
2020	707
2019	707

Our writing group have consistently recognised the difference individual teaching staff can make to their student experience and ultimately their outcomes as a DMU student. The evaluations of nominations have consisted of comments that staff have directly inspired students to want to learn more about their subject. The SU values the VCDTA feedback and is used to triangulate the data alongside other feedback mechanisms.

For example, a Fashion Buying with Marketing (Faculty of Arts Humanity & Design) student said of their lecturer that they *'continually goes above and beyond to provide not only the highest standard of teaching but also support. As one of [their] students I could really see how passionate [they are] and how much [they] genuinely cares for [their] students academically, but also mentally providing constant support and [their] own free time. [Their] support during my final year of university was incredible, [their] belief in me and words of encouragement will stay with me for life and for [them] I am forever grateful. For one of my modules I had with [them] I achieved 100%, I believe that in itself is a real reflection of [their] teaching. Without [their] warm and endearing nature and drive for teaching and sharing I would have never achieved such a high grade. Not only did I achieve higher grades than I thought was possible as well as awards, but [they] filled me with self confidence and self belief which I will take with me throughout my career.'*

Likewise, a student commented that the Programme Leader held *'high levels of empathy and compassion. [They] have been my support system ever since I joined DMU. Being an international student, I've had my share of struggles and [they] always been there for me and guided me throughout. [They] gives everything [their] heart and soul, and constantly shows up for [their] students and [they] really does light up rooms with [their] soothing energy. [They] taught me fashion business A and B in my first and second year, and if it wasn't for [their] encouraging spirit, I doubt I'd be able to get a first in one of the assignments. [They] truly has inspired me to learn more about the subject, and helped me to achieve the grade I've always wanted. Through assessment feedback, staff have also inspired students through challenge and rigor of the teaching.'*

A Computer Science student (Faculty of Computing, Engineering & Media) commented on their Programme Leader that *'From the start of my time at DMU [they] has made sure [their] module starts from the basics in week 1 and move their way up in a carefully considered way as to keep challenging you, but not so much as to overwhelm you and put you off. So then at the end you have learnt a considerable amount without ever feeling not clever enough. Nothing was overly complicated, and more complex things were always covered by an extra tutorial such as downloading things onto your own home computer. These extra tutorials were not necessary for [them] to do, but [they] did it anyway and it has proved to be a massive help.'*

Of the same lecturer a student commented that they *'shaped my career decision to become a programmer/software developer. [They] taught me programming on my first and second year and my grades are 90+. [They're] also my supervisor for my final year project and I couldn't have made a better choice. Every time I email [them] with a question instead of just giving me a direct answer [they] always makes sure to take the time to write in such way that it made me think of the answer myself.'*

The current student experience data provided through the latest NSS results on the Computer Science Programme outlines that the programme is on an upward trajectory, improving and we can see that computing is currently below benchmark for DMU, however current students are experiencing investment by university and seeing changes put into place to improve their experiences.

Business Entrepreneurship and Innovation (Faculty of Business and Law) students are clearly inspired by their lecturer, commenting that *'Every seminar I go to with [them], [they] inspires me, to want more out of life, to have a drive and a passion to be successful, [their] classes are not only a joy to attend, but I feel like I learn so much, as a student and as a person; [they] regularly helps build the confidence of [their] students to participate in [their] seminars, and teaches creative, out of the box thinking. In seminars, [they] always lets you know about [their] office hours, and that [they] is there to answer any questions, as well as talking about things like placement years, and life after university, reminding us the importance of setting goals, and how if we are determined we can achieve them. I am a disabled student, who has issues with teamwork and group projects as part of my disability, but disclosing my disability with [them], was very easy, and I have always been able to bring up my issues/concerns about group work to [them], and [they] has supported me through my issues, and discussed solutions, which has helped me feel at ease in [their] classroom, and supported, which can be difficult to find with other seminar tutors.'*

Finally, from a Psychology student (Faculty of Health and Life Sciences), the programme leader *'completely changed my experience of Research Methods, in fact he has completely transformed my whole experience at DMU. I am repeating the year and after 2 years I have been struggling so much with Research Methods. [Their] attitude towards teaching makes you as a student feel honoured to be taught by [them], [they] can joke around but still get the message across, [they] will answer all of my questions even if the answer is completely obvious and that kind of reassurance is so necessary especially after constantly feeling so unsure about your work from the year we have just experienced online. I went from feeling insecure about my work and my ability to feeling secure and confident in my abilities and work all thanks to the help of [them]. A good teacher will forever make a huge influence on a student's work.'*

These examples demonstrate that the student experience at DMU is led by teaching that inspires and challenges its students. Not only are students welcome to nominate for VCDTA, students are key component of the shortlisting and awarding to the successful nominees. SU's student representatives have also been partnered with in the development of the awards initiative, and feedback to further involve students in the awards process and recognise the prestige of these awards being student led has been welcomed. At University Learning and Teaching Committee, it was acknowledged that the current title of these awards VCDTA 'does not reflect the spirit of partnership with the SU' nor the high regard in which the awards are seen by staff due to their basis in student nomination. Therefore, the decision to rename the award the 'Student Choice Teaching Award' has been made, to better reflect the community of excellence in practice that is defined and selected by student nominations.

Student Outcomes

Embedding Mental wellbeing to establish connection, belonging and relationship-building

Our writing group identified and discussed the value of staff who treat students as individuals, and are invested in the progression of every individual on their own merit. The group explained that some of DMU's challenges laid in the variability of students' personal experiences of interacting with staff, including varying levels of support. There was an acknowledgement that Leicester had been locked down more than any other city during the pandemic, and that it took some time for students (and the University), to get over this experience.

The SU works with Healthy DMU and Wellbeing & Disability teams to ensure that students were safeguarded in their responses, and that appropriate levels of signposting and service-linking were offered at each stage. 400+ students were supported through the delivered of over 25 projects and campaigns which have included; academic stress, academic integrity, sexual health and wellness, bullying, mental and physical health, housing, money matters and much more. 'Wellbeing Wednesdays' activity workshops have also been added to the weekly provision. These projects delivered through collaboration sought to facilitate conversations around students' uncertainty, isolation and logistical challenges at the intersections of wellbeing and academic experience, taking individuals on personal feedback journeys. These events last year supported 400+ students in attending wellbeing activities hosted by the SU and ran by the university.

In 2021, the SU and University reviewed the project and created an open educational resource for the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) that has been published as part of a suite of collaborative enhancement projects designed to embed mental wellbeing into the student experience to better student outcomes from a whole institution approach. Integral to the project team were the student representatives and 2022 the project has been awarded a Collaborative Award for Teaching Excellence from Advance HE which is testament to the partnership between students, SU and the University.

The award recognised the work SU had in the submission and being able to engaging students through a 'Are you Okay?' campaign that inform a new collaborative action across the university and students to created five new wellbeing masterclasses for students, two new workshops for staff, a series of downloadable tutor packs for use in a variety of taught settings, unique online resources, opportunities for student voice leading to individualised support, and importantly a clear communication strategy about what was available, how and why to engage, to enhance mental wellbeing and student experience. This collaborative working has successfully embedded mental wellbeing across the University, from induction and staff development, to SU bye-law and University strategy changes.

Student Completion, Continuation, and Progression

Student groups at the SU have played a vital role in the positive outcomes for students at the University. Student group activity ranging from volunteering in the community, sport, media and societies have created physical and digital spaces for student to connect and create a sense of belonging and has been enabled our student to network and developed in their time at university. During the pandemic the SU invested in a digital meeting platform and made this free for student group members to be able to continue holding meetings and events, and removed the cost for student group membership removing any barriers to participation for groups. In its peak the total number of active student groups was 192, with 150 Societies, 3 Media Streams, 1 Volunteering

Group and 38 Sporting Clubs. The total number of unique society memberships has reached 3,956, with a total of 5,186 memberships sold.

In 2020 the SU successfully completed its accreditation with the national Investing in Volunteering (IiV) Award, recognising the high standard of support and opportunities we give student volunteering in student groups and course rep roles. Through this process a volunteers interviewed identifies that, *'There are great benefits from being a volunteer. I learn where to reach out to and I help people,'* and, *'We've provided support to people. This makes a difference, maybe not in grades but in their emotions'.* This demonstrates that providing opportunities for students to develop themselves is central. One volunteer said, *'I feel like I've learned a lot, a lot of new skills. I'm definitely more confident and it's good experience to carry with me through life'.*

These opportunities for personal development as a result of their roles in student groups, help students' future careers and gives them satisfaction in what they are doing. Volunteers said, *'Volunteering has had a very positive impact on my studies. I have gained further skills such as time management, managing resources, planning, and organisational skills, it's very helpful for my personal development,'* and, *'The Chair is a very active role and there's a lot of responsibility, but I do enjoy it, and I've learnt a lot such as project management skills'.*

In writing this submission its clear to see how the university has evolved over the last year and how students, SU and University are working in collaboration to improve student outcomes and experience. We are aware of challenging metrics on student experience, and we see first-hand work taking place to address these with student community, and thus ensuring students are co-owners of that improvement journey education and the SU as an enabler for this to happen.

Closing statements from our Executive Officers

'Being at DMU has truly made me more. As an International student with 3 degrees from DMU, through a span of 9 years, DMU has continued to help me grow and evolve. Whether it has been having mock courtrooms for my law course enabling me to get that practical knowledge or having actual channel 4 reporters in for my investigative journalism masters. Through all the degrees I have had unparalleled support from lecturers, personal tutors and the union. In fact, being a part of the student union allowed me to expand even further on my skills allowing for a more rounded cv result. It has been almost a decade of learning and growing in an environment that is so divers and multifaceted. Through my executive role, I got the platform to sit on the highest governing body of the university and students' union and I got to ensure that the student voice is heard and present when making decisions. From lobbying for more dance studio spaces to holding the universities first ever Sexual Health Awareness and Guidance week it has been a fulfilling, life changing experience in its truest form.' *Opportunities & Engagement Executive, 2021 & 2022*

'Choosing to study at DMU was the best decision of my life. I studied the perfect degree that was of interest and what industry I would like to work in. The support my lecturers and university staff provided was amazing, they ensured I thrived while at university. Although learning was hybrid last year. I still had the opportunity to work collaboratively for group work projects. This gave me the chance to still have interactions and share a student journey with my peers. The resources available in my faculty were perfect and accessible for my module and degree. I had the opportunity to attend a DMU Global trip to Amsterdam, where I learnt about sustainability which was related to a module I was studying during my first year. The trip allowed me to apply what I had experienced and learnt on the trip to my assignment. Overall my lecturers inspired me to enjoy university life and not to give up, but most importantly have the experience with friends I grew up with as well as making new ones along the way.' *Welfare Executive, 2022*