

Lancaster University Students' Union: TEF Student Submission 2023

Lancaster University Students' Union welcomes the opportunity to create this student submission. The views, comments, and concerns of students have been central to our approach. We have been working on a 'no surprises' basis with the University whilst remaining fully independent. The content of this submission is a reflection of the ongoing conversations we have, as a collective representative body of students, with the institution. We hope this exercise will be a vehicle for further collaboration and centring of the student voice within both Lancaster University and the HE sector at large.

Approach to Gathering Evidence

Data Source	Owner	Mechanism	Student Profile	Engagement
National Student Survey	Ipsos Mori & Lancaster University	Online Survey	Final Year Undergraduates	2018/19 - 2264, 80.3% 2019/20 - 2100, 69.6% 2020/21 - 2010, 63.5% 2021/22 - 2302, 67.0%
Student Life Pulse (SLP)	Students' Union	Online Survey	All UG Students	November 2021 – June 2022 – 771, 4.6%
'Being Well, Doing Well' 2020/21	Students' Union	Online Survey	All Students	November 2019 – June 2020 – 1681, 10.1%
Student Faculty Forums	Students' Union	Facilitated Discussion	Academic Reps	2019/20 - 427 Reps 2020/21 - 457 Reps 2021/22 - 385 Reps 2022/23 – 359 Reps
Annual Education Review (AER)	Students' Union	Report	All Students & Academic Reps	2018/19 2019/20 2020/21 2021/22
Departmental Lead Rep & Faculty Rep Reports	Students' Union	Report	Academic Reps	2018/19 2019/20 2020/21 2021/22
Student Voice Activity	Students' Union	Mixed Methods	All Students	
Advice Service Casework	Students' Union	Casework	All Students	2019/20 - 666 2020/21 - 726 2021/22 - 786 2022/23 - 375 (01/08/22 – 17/01/23)

In creating this submission, we have involved the Students' Union Executive Committee, Senior Academic Representatives, and our Trustee Board.

Academic experience and assessment

Teaching Quality

Feedback from Academic Representatives (from hereafter, Academic Reps) and survey work over the last four years has highlighted a consistently positive experience for students at Lancaster. This can be seen through Student Life Pulse (SLP) where we asked undergraduate students the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement '*Overall I am satisfied with the quality of my course*', there was an active satisfaction score of 77% either agreeing or strongly agreeing, with 12% stating an active disapproval score of disagree or strongly disagree. In the SLP, the University scored 83% satisfaction and only 9% dissatisfaction, highlighting a consistently strong performance. The University also scored highly in our survey for satisfaction with '*teaching on my course*' with 74% satisfaction and '*course content*' with 78% satisfaction.

Key themes flagged by Academic Reps as being areas of strength in the University were the variety and flexibility of modules, the application of practical teaching methods in practice-based disciplines: students in the Faculty of Health and Medicine (FHM) being notably positive about practical work and, for the wider student body, the use of optional lectures to cover topics like specialist software and additional skills. Levels of satisfaction tended to be higher amongst those students studying in beyond level four. Where in place, guest talks from non-academics and interactivity in lectures (through tools like Kahoot and Mentimeter) were highly valued, and students linked them to their learning gains. Students have also reported they would welcome more opportunities to study academic content and theorists from more culturally diverse backgrounds, to enhance their overall studies and understanding of topics. This was found to be most prominent for those studying with the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences (FASS) based disciplines, with many students praising the Faculty for the recent advancements that have been made.

Assessment

Student feedback over the last few years has shown there is a general satisfaction with assessment, which has been corroborated by SLP, which saw students give the University a satisfaction score of 60% when asked '*How satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the following aspects of your academic life*' on assessment. Although an overall positive score, there was an active dissatisfaction score of 20% which shows there are opportunities for further enhancement. Suggested areas for enhancement include a review of assessment weightings, as these are not always representative of the difficulty and effort required to complete a task. There is a need to look at a broader range of assessment methods which would be beneficial for both educational gain and providing transferable skills. Students in both Lancaster University Management School (LUMS) and the Faculty of Science and Technology (FST) valued the work the University was already doing in this area. Students in FHM also reported being very satisfied with practical assessments, in particular Sports & Exercise Science students.

Assessed group work continues to invoke mixed responses amongst Academic Reps. We found consensus amongst students that they would like to see Departments doing more to address issues of other students 'not pulling their weight'. Academic Reps recommended that peer review forms part of the assessment process in group work and for Departments to investigate how

workload distribution can be more fairly allocated within groups. We are pleased to see this is being piloted in some Departments.

Students have flagged to us an ongoing concern with the bunching of deadlines, creating a heavy workload for students at certain times of year. In SLP, 53% of respondents reported being either '*concerned*' or '*very concerned*' about academic workload. The bunching of deadlines is a significant stressor but also an occurrence which negates the benefits of formative assessment that is intended to support students' academic growth. We saw in the 'Being Well Doing Well' survey that 69% of respondents said that '*keeping up with study*' caused them stress either '*often*' or '*all of the time*'. FASS has created policy in which students can limit the number of deadlines that fall in a 72-hour period to three. Work is being undertaken by the VP Education in conjunction with Associate Deans for Education in other Faculties to replicate this approach.

When discussed at Faculty Forums, the consensus is that future assessment design should be delivered through a co-creation model, with students as equal partners. Positively, this is being picked up by the University as part of the Curriculum Transformation Programme.

Assessment Feedback

The University has seen a decline in student satisfaction around assessment feedback in the NSS over the last four years which has been corroborated with qualitative feedback from students over the same time period. Whilst there has been a noticeable decline in students reporting satisfaction with the timeliness of feedback, general satisfaction around the quality of the feedback given has remained consistent. In SLP, we saw an active satisfaction score of 52% when asked '*how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with the following aspects of your academic life*' (feedback on my work) and an active dissatisfaction score of 28%. The bunching of deadlines across all Faculties is viewed as a contributing factor to lower satisfaction levels around assessment feedback, and students' ability to use the feedback to improve. We would like to see formative assessment distributed more evenly across the academic year to aid students' individual academic development. Academic Reps have raised instances of assessment feedback being inappropriate for the type of assignment, being too vague or not personalised to individuals' work. The Students' Union has seen the University continue to make improvements in the transparency of grading criteria over the last few years. However, the quality of marking rubrics is a concern; students describe rubrics as too vague and not supporting them to prepare for, and improve upon, future assessments.

When asked '*to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement about your academic experience assessment and feedback*', only 51% of respondents agreed that '*the feedback I receive on my work helps me to improve for my next assessment*' and 26% disagreed with the statement. We have received qualitative feedback from Academic Reps that not all students receive assessment feedback within the four-week turnaround time outlined in University policy. When polled during the Lent Term Faculty Forums in 2021/22, Academic Reps reported that their Departments, on average, were meeting the required turnaround approximately 70% of the time. The way students perceive this depends on the transparency given around the reason for the delay in returning assessments. We see that when students are given a reasonable explanation of why their work may not be returned within four weeks, they tend to be more understanding of the delay.

Resits

More work needs to be done to support continuation of study where students have failed assessments and are required to resit. There is a lack of consistent learning support available to those students at the time of resit, made more challenging due to the relatively short timeframes between Summer Term exams and when resits are rescheduled during the Summer Vacation period. Students who have engaged with our Advice Service reported feeling that there is little support available for those undertaking resits. Many students feel that the existing support is punitive rather than a supportive measure. More tailored support is also needed for students who have either passed by a small margin or are allowed to progress following an appeal.

Knowledge and Application of Learning

Qualitative feedback from Academic Reps and SLP has shown that students find their course content to be intellectually stimulating, with 83% of respondents satisfied that their course is intellectually challenging. Feedback from Faculty Forums in 2022 highlighted that FASS students tend to feel the most intellectually stimulated. However, LUMS students reported lower satisfaction with practical applicability of their course content. In SLP, 60% were satisfied with '*opportunities to apply their learnings*', only 15% were dissatisfied.

Timetabling

Students are generally satisfied with timetabling, with 70% active satisfaction in SLP and only 13% dissatisfaction. Despite this, there has been notable dissatisfaction with the scheduling of teaching after 6pm. This is felt most adversely by students with caring responsibilities and those who commute to site. The move towards blended learning has partially alleviated this issue, but post-6pm teaching continues to be a problem. Timetabling academic content on a Wednesday afternoon, which should be free of teaching, has been a core concern for students who engage in elite sports or pedagogically enriching extracurricular activities and those who work part-time. Students have reported being increasingly time-poor and are placing a stronger emphasis on the learning opportunities they gain from these extracurricular activities. As a result of Wednesday afternoon teaching, students are having to choose between core study or enhancing their skills through extracurricular learning.

Students value strong social and learning communities in order to enrich their wellbeing, enhance their educational, and personal development. At Lancaster, this is supported by the Students' Union's work with College student leaders. Societies, sports clubs, and volunteering opportunities provide students with practical opportunities to develop new skills and build strong learning communities. Qualitative feedback from students involved in pedagogically enriching extracurricular activities also highlighted their benefit in the building of social capital and employability.

Students have raised concerns about the stress induced by bunched deadlines. We would like to see the University mitigate the detrimental effect on wellbeing and the negative impact that bunched deadlines can have on students' academic achievement. Qualitative feedback from Academic Reps has been that the Departments who build 'reading weeks' into their module construction, such as the Departments of ELCW and LaEL, this stress is reduced. We would strongly recommend that, for the Curriculum Transformation Programme to be a successful and worthy endeavour, 'reading weeks' must be built into the academic year for all disciplines.

Blended Learning

Students' views on blended learning continue to present a mixed picture. Feedback from current students and Academic Reps show this to differ depending on level of study; for example, first year students seem to value a more in-person experience, whereas third years increasingly value the flexibility that blended learning and teaching can provide. Cumulatively, there is a slight overall preference towards in-person teaching, whilst many students are still correlating face-to-face teaching with higher value for money and quality. Students have described the additional online resources and recordings as '*exceptionally useful*', in particular recorded lectures which are seen as beneficial for '*theory heavy modules*'. To reach its full potential, Academic Reps have repeatedly lobbied for more accurate captioning of recorded lectures.

During lockdowns, students raised concerns around loneliness and a lack of motivation. We found lower levels of engagement from students in the digital learning environment. In the 'Being Well Doing Well' survey only 38% of respondents agreed that '*I feel part of a community of staff and students*' and 38% disagreed. In the subsequent SLP, 57% of respondents said they agreed or strongly agreed when asked '*I feel part of a learning community at Lancaster University*' with only 20% of respondents disagreeing.

There is a strong feeling amongst Academic Reps that blended learning needs to be a distinct theme within curriculum design. Student voice also needs to be embedded at the heart of the design process because students can best identify areas for improvement.

Digital Infrastructure

Students feel that the University is '*digital ready*'. They score the University highly with a 78% satisfaction for digital resources in SLP. Where it is well utilised, technology is valued greatly by students. There is, however, a perception that not all staff are sufficiently trained nor confident in using the available resource. Academic Reps would like to see additional training made available for staff, to help them better utilise the available digital resources to enhance teaching and learning support.

From discussions at Faculty Forums in 2020/21, it was clear that Academic Reps felt dissatisfied with inconsistencies on Moodle pages. Senior Academic Reps initiated a project to identify and collate examples of Moodle good practice which was shared with the Moodle team in Information System Services to help inform their projects. The project also led to Educational Development running Moodle workshops for staff.

Examinations

Online examinations have been welcomed by students. However, some students have expressed strong dissatisfaction with the format. A theme from Academic Reps and via Casework from our Advice Service has been that students' home conditions are not always suitable for online exams and learning. This can severely disadvantage some students, especially those with caring responsibilities or those from a lower socioeconomic background. This was felt most during lockdown periods. Those impacted reported feeling that not enough consideration was given to how online learning would be mitigated. It should be commended that, during the Summer 2022

exam period, this feedback was quickly enacted on by the University; the Library mobilised to free up as much bookable space, which was suitable to take exams in, as possible.

In one instance from Summer 2022, students wrote an open letter to their Department about their dissatisfaction with in-person exams. This move back to in-person exams was a result of PSRB requirements. In Michaelmas 2022, Academic Reps in LUMS reported a concerning lack of communication as to why this occurred, leading to high levels of dissatisfaction amongst students. We would welcome a review of internal communication methods, with a commitment to parity of messaging across the institution.

Communication

Whilst Departments and Faculties have historically been effective in communicating information to students in a clear and timely manner, this has declined over the last two years. Students report wanting to see clearer information in handbooks, access to reading lists in advance, and clearer communication about module choices. The University is proactively working with us on this. In response to student feedback, the University undertook a significant project: ASK (Advice, Support & Knowledge). ASK is a personalised system for students to find information relating to their study and student life. Whilst ASK provides a central hub for students, it has not been sufficiently communicated that this is the purpose it serves. When students fully understand why and when to use ASK, it will add significant value to the Lancaster experience.

Students on joint honours programmes also express a strong need for there to be improved communication between their Departments. An agreed area of collaborative enhancement between the University and Students' Union has been a review of student-facing communications.

Student Voice

Student Voice and acting on students' feedback has been one of the lower scoring areas for the University for student satisfaction in recent years in the NSS. In the SLP, when asked '*The University takes feedback from students about their academic experience seriously*' survey respondents gave a satisfaction score of 40% and an active dissatisfaction score of 31%. When further asked, '*The University has made positive changes to the academic experience based on feedback from students*', there was a satisfaction score of 38% and an active dissatisfaction score of 31%. Students feel that there are opportunities to provide feedback to Departments and outcomes or changes that result from student feedback are communicated. However, this is an area for further enhancement within the University. Academic Reps reported that staff are willing to listen to student opinions and make small changes, however bigger changes can be more challenging. There has been a perception that many staff can sometimes respond defensively to feedback, which can then restrict communication. Academic Reps would like staff to be more open to constructive feedback and adopt a partnership approach when tackling issues with their course. Academic Reps in LUMS and FST reported that they find their Staff-Student Committees helpful, whilst Academic Reps across all Faculties reported sometimes struggling to know how to provide feedback without causing upset or offense. Academic Reps would like to see more information about changes that students benefit from as a result of previous Reps' work. Some examples of good practice and enhancement already undertaken by the University which should be commended are:

- The introduction of a new Student Feedback Committee.
the committee is made up of senior University staff and senior Academic Reps. The development of the committee is a milestone achievement for student voice at Lancaster and is aimed at developing institutional responses to student feedback.
- The introduction of termly 'Strengthening the Student Voice' workshops
These are aimed at sharing good practice and providing a forum for academic and professional services staff involved in student voice activity to discuss enhancement.
- In 2021/22, the Students' Union and staff within LUMS worked collaboratively to develop online training materials for Academic Reps using Microsoft SWAY. This has been rolled out across the Academic Rep scheme in 2022/23.

University Estate

Students have given overwhelmingly positive feedback about the Library. They view it as not just an excellent study and learning space but also central in enabling social learning amongst students, especially distance learners. During lockdowns, the Library was a constant resource for students who identify the space as a safe and welcoming environment. The Library has also been a powerful advocate for change within the University when it comes to technology, training, and support. In the SLP, the Library scored an 83% satisfaction score when asked about library resources. Lancaster University Library won the Outstanding Library Team Award at the 2022 Times Higher Education Awards.

Students continue to report that social learning is important in their learning development at University. More communal study and 'hub' spaces in Departments would be welcomed by students to facilitate social learning. This was strongly articulated by students who undertake placements such as Social Work and Medicine, as well as those distant learners who occasionally need to visit campus. LUMS students highly valued the 'Hub' space in the Management School.

Careers, Employability and Placements

Many students actively engage with the central Careers Service. However, there is a perception that it is not subject-specific enough for every students' needs. Students would like to see more discipline-specific careers support. Activity that is embedded within Faculties, Departments and Programmes is well-received by students. For example, LUMS was cited as being an area of careers good practice within the University where students are satisfied with the level of careers support, placement opportunities, and internships available. LUMS students value the importance of placements and internships in helping to prepare them for the future. A number of students have highlighted the financial constraints of unpaid internships and the barrier they represent. Many students are becoming increasingly worried around the Cost of Living and the fact that they need to work alongside their studies. This will impact on their ability to take part in placement or internship opportunities.

Feedback from some students in FASS is that they feel that their counterparts in other Faculties receive more careers support. They would like to see more placements and work experience opportunities available to them. The majority of students in FST and FHM feel that there are good opportunities for internships and placements, especially in Departments that have close links with relevant industries.

Qualitative feedback from Academic Reps indicates that many students feel that although having a degree will improve their career prospects, it was not clear how their course directly prepares them for work. Students have also indicated the value of opportunities to engage and work closely with alumni and employers during events on campus. Students welcome the work the Careers Service has undertaken in strengthening this over the last few years. This is an area the University should continue to enhance, particularly in helping students to identify non-traditional graduate employment routes.

Work Readiness

In SLP, 61% of students agreed with the statement '*my current activities are preparing me for the future*'. Whilst an overall positive score, there is scope for future enhancement by the University to help students identify more clearly how they can best prepare for the future.

Whilst the University has embedded Graduate Attributes into the curriculum, it is not necessarily always easily identifiable by students. We would like to see the University re-examine whether the Graduate Attributes embedded within courses are fit for purpose for 2023 and beyond. A greater focus should therefore be on communicating what students should expect from a Lancaster degree.

Student Wellbeing & Mental Health

Wellbeing and mental health continues to be an area of concern for many of our students. This has been flagged across every level of study and all Faculties. It has been more acutely felt since the beginning of the first lockdown. In SLP, 47% of respondents reported their time at the University had a negative impact on their mental health. It should be noted that 66% of those respondents will have had some of their study directly impacted by COVID restrictions. In contrast 52% of respondents said that their time at the University had a positive impact on their personal confidence and self-esteem.

During lockdowns, students felt it was important that the University acknowledged that they were learning in a pandemic, not just studying online. During this time, students regularly raised concerns about their wellbeing and mental health. Common themes included: feeling burnt out; being over stimulated due to the volume of online content; and feeling overwhelmed a lot quicker during the pandemic. This can also be seen in the 'Being Well Doing Well' Survey, where we saw 82% of respondents saying lockdown had a negative impact on their University life, and more of half of those said it had a '*very negative*' impact.

Exceptional Circumstances (ECs)

Qualitative feedback from Academic Reps and via our Advice Service highlighted that ECs are not, at present, being applied consistently. Students are reporting that ECs are being managed differently between Departments and there is a lack of guidance for students on what to expect. It is felt by students that procedures are too rigid, lack flexibility, and are not applied based on an individual's specific needs.

Evidence thresholds required to have mitigations applied, or even ECs considered, are perceived by students to be too high, too bureaucratic, and too burdensome. Students are asked to provide

detailed evidence, which can be both hard to obtain and, at times, retraumatising to compile on an unrealistically short timescale.

It is extremely challenging for those who have not been able to get formal diagnoses to successfully receive ECs. There is also concern from students that the current EC policies are not fit for purpose for those who have chronic conditions. This is corroborated by casework from our Advice Service. We have seen many instances of individuals who have experienced acute symptom flare-ups being unable to have ECs applied due to previous mitigations having already been applied for the same condition. There is a feeling amongst students that staff members responsible for ECs lack the necessary knowledge and understanding to manage cases adequately or sensitively.

Independent Learning Support Plans (ILSPs)

At present, many students who have ILSPs report an inconsistent experience across the University. Many report poor communication of their ILSPs to teaching staff and as a result, the lack of application of their ILSP. These students further report that where the support is not in place, the onus is on them to pursue Departments to apply the reasonable adjustments to which they are entitled.

In 2020/21 the Students' Union's Students with Disabilities Forum launched the 'Improve Your Learning' report that looked specifically at accessibility issues concerning modes of teaching. This garnered 573 responses across all Departments and year groups. The report found that as much as half of students with ILSPs are dissatisfied with the current system. The report and its recommendations were received by the University, with the Dean for EDI committing to working with the Forum on an ongoing action plan. There is consensus amongst students with disabilities that they should not need to ask for the reasonable adjustments that they are legally entitled to; they should be able to access teaching, learning, and assessments on an equal footing with their peers. This is an area the University has been making progress towards and is a core focus point of the Curriculum Transformation Programme, which we welcome. Whilst there are challenges around the application of ILSPs, it should be noted that there is a positive awarding gap for students with ILSPs.

Summary

Overall, Lancaster University delivers an excellent quality of teaching. The way we have approached this submission has been to highlight areas of quality, alongside areas for enhancement. We have found that there are many small pockets of good practice that ought to be celebrated and then spread across the institution, such as our award-winning Library. Through our conversations with students over the past four years, we have consistently found a strong desire for increased flexibility, accessibility, and appreciation for students' individual circumstances. The University has just begun the journey of Curriculum Transformation. For this to be a genuine success we would welcome the development of 'reading weeks', a truly culturally diverse curriculum, and a functioning Exceptional Circumstances system. Underlying all of the issues that students have raised to us is a sentiment that they are not adequately informed of the excellent services and opportunities provided by the institution.

The overarching theme of good practice we have seen develop throughout the writing process has been the successful co-creation of teaching and learning, with student engagement at its heart.