

Relationship with Institution

As a Students’ Union, we have a strong relationship with the University as a ‘critical friend’, working in partnership to create the best experience and education possible for our students. This is best exemplified through the Annual Quality Review, discussed below, which functions as a form of student submission, setting out the Union’s recommendations for improvement in the coming year and which we have drawn on heavily in compiling this submission.

Approach to Evidence Gathering

NSU used a variety of methodologies to gather evidence for this submission.

NSU Annual Quality Review: This document is a key part of our role as critical friend to the institution and its continuous improvement through student feedback. The review annually presents NSU’s view of the quality of Northumbria’s teaching and learning provision using data collected during the academic year from a range of sources.

- Analysis of academic advice and support cases
- Feedback from student representatives
- Relevant surveys such as our annual student survey, SLTAs etc
- Officer manifestos
- Publicly available and institution specific data such as NSS

The review covers, academic standards, teaching excellence, student satisfaction, equity and inclusion, student support, student engagement and voice and proposes recommendations to the University for areas of improvement which form the basis of an agreed action plan.

The review and action plan is submitted to the University’s Education Committee and ultimately to Board of Governors. Drawing on the evidence from these historic reviews gives NSU a perspective on the development of teaching at the University over the past few years to the present day.

University data: As well as publicly available data such as National Student Survey, the Union drew on data produced by the University through its quality assurance processes. We commend the University on its transparency and its commitment to student representation on all decision-making bodies across the institution.

Advice Cases: NSU provides students access to free independent advice in respect to academic matters. This data provides a wealth of useful information for NSU and the University to identify trends and issues in service provision. In 2021/22 NSU’s advice service opened 840 new cases, 13% increase on the previous year.

Arts Design and Social Sciences	12%
Business and Law	17%
Health and Life Sciences	31%
Engineering and Environment	17%

Student Led Teaching Awards (SLTA): Annually NSU surveys students to find out, in their own words, what excellent learning and teaching looks like through recognition of the staff who deliver it. In 2022 691 staff were nominated and 15 awards issued. Split of nominations by faculty is in line with their size as a faculty.

Table 1 SLTA 2022 Faculty split of nominations

In addition, the Union undertook two specific pieces of student consultation in the months September and October 2022 to inform this submission. Because we can draw on the Quality Review and SLTA documentation, these exercises mixed qualitative and quantitative to see if current student views aligned with historic data and to draw out relevant insights.

Arts Design and Social Sciences	23%
Business and Law	23%
Health and Life Sciences	38%
Engineering and Environment	14%

Table 2 Faculty split of focus group participants

Focus Groups: In September 2022, we conducted seven semi structured groups of qualitative interviews with 98 students. Participants represented the diversity of backgrounds and courses at Northumbria, all in their second or third year of study. Using the NSS categories students were asked to discuss their experiences and whether they had improved, worsened, or stayed the same since starting at university, giving examples to illustrate their answer.

Student Engagement Forum (SEF): Another key piece of partnership working with the University is the Student Engagement Forum. Created in 2014 it partners University senior leadership with Sabbaticals and student representatives to speak directly with hundreds of students, listening to their perspectives in person through a series of events three to four times a year (GOAL days or Go Out and Listen). The Students' Union collates these into reports to the University's Education Committee with actions to then be implemented.

The November 2022 SEF asked students four questions aligned to TEF subject areas. 641 students from across all campuses participated.

1. My course's content and delivery engage me in my learning, and this helps to develop my knowledge and skills
2. The Uni's learning resources help to support my learning experience
3. The Uni supports me to succeed and progress beyond my studies
4. The Uni supports me to develop my academic skills e.g., critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, academic writing, research and referencing skills

We used a Likert scale of Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree for each question supplemented by qualitative answers where students wished to expand.

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1	32%	51%	13%	3%	1%
2	40%	49%	9%	2%	1%
3	32%	45%	17%	5%	1%
4	42%	42%	13%	3%	1%

Table 3 SEF scores by question

Faculty		Campus		Fee Status		Level of Study	
Arts Design and Social Sciences	7%	City Campus	53%	UK	39%	UG	40%
Business and Law	31%	Coach Lane Campus	17%	EU	2%	PG	43%
Health and Life Sciences	26%	Amsterdam Campus	1%	International	42%		
Engineering and Environment	17%	London Campus	10%	Student declined to give data	17%		
Central Dept	1%						
Student declined to give data		17%					

Table 4 SEF Demographics

Partnership with the University

The University included NSU staff in the process of developing its own submission through both working groups and participation in the writing groups as well as sight of the final documentation. We also wish to express support for the content and conclusions of the institution submission and its evidence.

Throughout this student submission we draw on the provider submission where relevant rather than duplicate here. Our submission uses data from students gathered in September and October 2022 which we believe illustrates or provides further context to the provider submission or our previous Quality Review, as well as highlighting areas where we see further work is required. That should be seen in the context of the University's strong commitment to improving student experience.

Provider Context

As noted in the provider submission, Northumbria is an anchor University for the region, from which it heavily draws its undergraduate population. The region is characterised by local authorities with higher than national levels of deprivation [Mapping income deprivation at a local authority level, ONS, May 2021].

The Office for Students quality and standards requirements have been clearly embedded throughout the aims, principles, and objectives of the University Education strategy.

Academic Standards: In the 2022 Quality Review the Students' Union expressed a high degree of confidence in the University's academic standards. This is based on the University's Registry rigorous systems of quality assurance including drawing on Students' Union insights through the evidence of student representation and academic caseload and involving the Union in review of regulations as well as the involvement of Students' Union officers and representatives in many of these processes and decision making with high transparency of data.

Northumbria Strategy: Following a change in senior leadership since 2021, Northumbria has developed a new Education Strategy. Developed through 2021/22 in partnership with the Students' Union, it was signed off in November 2021.

As a Students' Union we welcome its clear focus on equity of access to, and success in, higher education for all students, regardless of background, commitment to the Northeast and positioning of the importance of high-quality teaching experience at the heart of the University's work.

The University has just initiated a round of planning for its new strategic plan with multiple routes for Students' Union and student input.

Academic Experience and Assessment Teaching

As one of the largest Higher Education institutions in the UK, there is a diverse student experience.

Evidence from the Student Led Teaching Awards (figure 1) provides many examples of outstanding teaching delivered across the University which support the evidence in the provider submission that teaching quality is materially in line with benchmark [provider submission].

One area of concern is that the weight (68%) of qualitative comments in the focus groups perceived teaching to have remained the same for those students and that in many cases students did not perceive previously identified issues to have been resolved as they enter a new academic year. Given the breadth of student satisfaction in the 2022 NSS, 'teaching on my course' by department increased from 52.71% to 86.5%, addressing areas of inconsistency and raising the threshold across the organisation remains a challenge which we believe can be addressed through the new Education Strategy with its focus on the teaching experience.



Figure 1 Word cloud of 2022 SLTA nominations

Assessment

In 2014 the University formally adopted a Students' Union recommendation for a mandatory twenty-day turnaround time for all assessment. This is monitored and we believe the subsequent culture of prompt response of feedback for assessed work across the institution has been a key part of student satisfaction in this area.

In 2022 NSS the institution scored 70.58% on Assessment and Feedback, above sector. The Focus Groups support this. Thematic analysis of the qualitative comments shows students felt marking and feedback is fair, consistent with clear criteria with noted improvements in the timeliness of feedback, practical learning opportunities and peer review systems. The following quote from the Focus Groups illustrate the language used by participants.

Helpful feedback in person and online. They added helpful comments throughout the project. The feedback I received on my feedback/lab report were very in depth and on time. The marking criteria is available and pointed out throughout. Clear assignment feedback.

A second theme identified across responses is that even when students are satisfied, they still perceive a need for greater levels of feedback to help their improvement. Northumbria continues to seek to improve in this area recently signing up to the Students' Future Manifesto and a student-focused approach to information and support.

Course content and delivery

In 2022 NSS 73% respondents stated that their course challenged them to achieve their best work. Our student consultation this term scored even higher with 85% of undergraduate students who took part in the GOAL Day agreeing or strongly agreeing that their course content and delivery engaged them in their learning, and this helped to develop their knowledge and skills. In the Focus Groups thematic analysis showed participants perceived course delivery had improved, citing more consistent lecturers and friendly, approachable staff. A minority raised concerns of consistency of teaching practice and lack of practical opportunities.

It has been a long standing pre COVID position of the Union, set out in the Quality Review, that recording of lectures reduces inconsistencies and enhances student satisfaction. We are supportive of the University policy post COVID to make this standard aspect in all teaching and learning.

Research

The impact of a research-intensive University on student experience is not something easily assessed from the perspective of students. The provider submission highlights the importance of research to programme design in the PFNA. As part of this we commend the University commitment to work with the Students' Union who recruit and train a team of student reviewers annually. These aim to sample 25% of programmes up for validation or review annually. Their role is to help review course criteria and descriptors from a student perspective and play a key role making the research which underpins teaching accessible to students.

Resources, Support and Student Engagement

How well the university or college supports staff professional development and academic practice:

This is not an area that the Students' Union is qualified to address or that comes from student feedback. We refer to the provider submission particularly HEA Fellowship rates and the growth in academic teaching qualifications [provider submission] an approach the Students' Union supports as being in the interests of student learning experience.

How supportive the learning environment is, and how far students can access the academic support they need:

For most students it is the quality of the support they receive which makes the difference in their learning and outcomes. Staff, whether academic or professional services, who provide high quality advice, insight, and support both bring the teaching to life, enable students to enrich their experience through access to new services and resources and ensure students at need receive the help required.

At Northumbria, the Student Led Teaching Awards (SLTA) have demonstrated year on year the wealth of support given to students from across the University. Some quotes from 2022 are provided below to illustrate.

His positivity and encouragement as well as the understanding of students' ability can enlighten any students toward their dream

She is an outstanding lecturer. She is innovative in the way she both creates and presents her lectures and seminars. Her teaching style is unique which allows students to fully immerse themselves in their studies

For going above and beyond not just teaching the materials but making them engaging and interactive by using common real-life objects to explain a deeper physical idea

He is an exceptionally passionate and helpful person and tutor. He has gone out of his way to help students achieve their best, both regarding the module as well as regarding personal interests

The SEF GOAL Day data provides evidence that this support continues to be common across the University:

- 77% respondents agreed or strongly agreed *The Uni supports me to succeed and progress beyond my studies*
- 84% agreed or strongly agreed *The Uni supports me to develop my academic skills e.g., critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, academic writing, research and referencing skills*

This is higher than the 2022 NSS question on Academic Support.

As in the NSS, EU and overseas students reported higher levels of satisfaction. Satisfaction was evenly distributed across levels of study, with slightly lower levels of satisfaction at Levels 3 and 7. Students cited skills such as critical thinking, analytic reasoning, problem solving, academic writing, research, and referencing skills. Some students also mentioned that their literature and research skills had improved because of access to these factors.

The TEF focus groups asked students about their priorities for this year:

- Careers and Employability 39%
- Wellbeing 25%
- Extracurricular activity 20%
- Academic achievement 16%

Careers and Employability:

Areas of careers and employability students wanted to engage with were updates and opportunities via text message and email, more tailored advice and opportunities, more opportunities to gain experience, more industry specialists, more networking opportunities, and more information on further study options. We note that these are all services provided by the University, informed by the career readiness survey which students undertake at enrolment (see provider submission). The impact of this work is of course in the outcomes of graduates (see next section).

Wellbeing:

Student wellbeing is a key priority for the University through its Business Outcome 8.

Student feedback on these services can be hard to gauge as they are often only accessed at need when students are experiencing mental and emotional distress. However anecdotal feedback to the Union from students has been positive in respect to the service they receive

Students in the focus group expressed a desire for improvements in the availability and promotion of wellbeing services and support, as well as better support from personal tutors and more information on sexual health. While noting that at times in the academic year, demand for these services will always exceed supply, we also note that over the past five years the University has continued to invest and innovate to meet student welfare needs including the following;

- Investment in additional counselling staff including access to staff from a BAME background.
- Through Health Assured provide a 24-hour telephone counselling and advice helpline as part of the Student Assistance programme.

- Contracted Problem Shared, a third party that offers a range of diverse therapists based on need.
- Investment in Blackbullion, a financial advice platform to assist students with one of the main causes of poor mental health, money.
- Investment in the Students' Union to provide a range of complementary services focused on resilience and mental health first aid.
- Through the pandemic made significant investment for students including welfare checks, food parcels, and a laundry service.
- Increased financial aid by 50% for students as the impact of the 2022/23 cost of living crisis became clear.

NSU also commends the University's approach to handling serious welfare incidents. Evidence from inquiries into suicides in other institutions highlighted the risk to students at need when departments and services of a university do not communicate effectively. Northumbria's critical incident approach makes sure to bring together all the staff involved in a student's life to ensure that risks and welfare issues are addressed systematically.

Extracurricular:

The University and Students' Union work closely in delivering the "Be part of it" Campaign launched in September 2022, which provides weekly on-campus, on-line and community activities for over 300 students so far with expected growth of over 1,200 by 2023. Be Part of It sits alongside other extracurricular activities including sports provision and Students' Union societies and activities which support over 6,000 students annually [data from Northumbria Sport and Students' Union memberships 2023/23]. Students' Union has benefitted from University funding to develop its volunteer accreditation system which is designed to improve employability of those volunteers by enabling them to reflect on their experiences and articulate the benefits those experiences bring in interview. The system is closely integrated to the University Graduate Futures offer and was recognised in the Educate North Awards 2020.

Academic Achievement - Personal Tutors:

Following consultation with staff and students the University revised its personal tutor policy in 2019. Student feedback captured in our 2022 Quality Review highlighted further work was needed to create a consistent student experience. This is reflected in the Focus Groups which were evenly split between positive and negative comments regarding speed of response, accessibility, and quality of advice. As part of the response to the Quality Review the University has included personal tutoring within the Education Strategy Delivery Plan and given remit to the new role of Dean of Students to further develop and strengthen the system.

Academic Achievement – Access to advice on misconduct and support:

From our recommendations within the NSU Quality Review Report and continuous trends revealed through our Advice Service, we are working in partnership with the University on academic integrity. Specifically, looking to improve communications, both centrally and locally to reduce inconsistencies, and aligning Northumbria standards of practice with the OIA best practice standards. We are pleased to note that relevant updates have been made to relevant guidance and the student portal, staff have been provided an information session from the OIA, as well as internal briefing sessions from expert teams. We applaud Northumbria for the recent changes to self-certification and evidence within their policies, following our recommendations.

Academic misconduct remains one of the most common areas where students needed advice and support. A recommendation from the 2021/22 Quality Review is to address occurrences of conflicting advice from academics and central services over what constitutes misconduct and how issues should be handled. This recommendation comes from the wealth of data generated through our advice service.

Academic Achievement- Library:

Northumbria has long been justly proud of its Library and its innovative approaches to supporting student learning. From the Students' Union perspective, it has an outstanding culture of responsiveness to user needs delivering a strong programme of study skills online and in person across all campuses. This is reflected in its consistently strong NSS and retention of the Customer Service Excellence Charter Mark. Support services provided through the Library continue to grow,

for example creation of a dedicated in person IT support hub (the IT Place) within the ground floor to make IT support more accessible.

Academic Achievement– Inclusion and Success:

We note the University investment over the past few years in the inclusion team alongside the established Student Success Team. The latter provide key support to students looking to move courses or other change of circumstances or manage personal extenuating circumstances. The team has worked with the Students' Union over recent years to ensure its approach continues to be accessible and easily understood by students, drawing on the learning of our advice team.

The Inclusion team has significantly expanded work recently to offer a dedicated package of support to care leavers, estranged carers and sanctuary scholars as well as helping students complete Disability Statements.

How well physical and virtual learning resources support teaching and learning

In the SEF GOAL data 89% of students reported *The Uni's learning resources help to support my learning experience*. For this submission we have highlighted areas where we continue to work with the University to improve resources or where we see provision as being outstanding.

Timetabling:

Timetabling has been an area in which Northumbria historically performs below the national average in the NSS and has been raised by the Union through the Quality Review on that basis and from student feedback.

We recommended that the University prioritise the release of timetables for programmes with a high number of students who have care responsibilities or work part-time, particularly for those in the Coach Lane campus which have the highest proportion of students with caring responsibilities who need to arrange childcare. Over the past two years the University has taken this recommendation on board and publish timetables earlier in the summer, although more work is needed to make them accessible pre-enrolment.

Qualitative from Focus Groups and SEF GOAL day indicate that this remains an area of concern for students across the University.

Library:

As stated, the Library is a key learning resource which has benefitted from investment over the past decade, expanding access to IT and mixed study spaces to reflect the different modes of student learning with 2,229 spaces available [provider statement]. This is recognised in the consistently high NSS scores.

As a Students' Union we also applaud the Library's commitment to pushing for courses to have 100% of reading lists online (Digital First) and accessible through its provision, saving students money on expensive textbooks and meaning they can access those resources wherever they need to.

Estate:

Over the past five years the University has made significant investment in the physical learning environment for the Faculty of Engineering and Environment with a new centre for computer and information sciences as well as a new learning hub for the Faculty, increased 24/7 IT access for students including specialist software and expanded the London Campus.

This year it has initiated plans for significant capital investment in health and life sciences over the next five years which will replace estate in this area and bring students from Coach Lane into City Campus.

Online resources:

While access to IT resources has generally had positive responses in NSS (79% in 2022), students have reported mixed views on the platforms the University uses to deliver information and teaching.

The **student portal** is the University's central website for students to access information not related to their course. Through student feedback the Union has highlighted a range of issues which have been captured in the Quality Review 2022. As a result, the University has made

improvements recently to the logic of the search functions to make it more accessible and this work continues to improve student experience in this core resource.

Student experience of Blackboard, the learning and teaching platform is overall positive (as gauged through recent years of student representative feedback) but inconsistent relating to disparities in how teaching staff use the platform. In its current strategic plan, the University has recognised the need to ensure staff and students are digitally literate and able to use platforms to their full effect. Please see provider submission for further information on their approach to upskilling staff.

How well the university or college engages with its students, leading to improvements to the experiences and outcomes of its students

Student Voice:

Student voice is a very important aspect of Northumbria University's mission and strategy. Students play an important role in shaping the delivery of learning and teaching at Northumbria and the systems in place for student engagement are strong overall.

Northumbria's 'Continuous Programme Performance Review (CPPR)' and 'Module Evaluation Questionnaires (MEQ)' introduced in 2021 simplified the University process for seeking student feedback, tying into a cycle of continuous improvement.

As well as these core processes the University has a strong partnership with the Students' Union to engage students through a robust representation structure including student participation on all key decision-making bodies in the University including governors, the receipt of an annual Quality Review from the Students' Union with commitment to address recommendations and joint work on projects like the Student Engagement Forum to increase opportunities for students to speak directly to senior staff.

NSU's network of over 1,000 Programme Representatives ensures there is a voice for each Northumbria cohort, with our Leadership Rep team comprising of Department and Faculty Lead Reps, and a body of PGR Representatives. Our 'leadership rep' team are ably supported by faculty and institutional leaders to provide a voice in faculty-level decision-making and to appraise the University leadership of grassroots student experiences, and our Students' Union representation permeates all levels of the University's committee structures.

Student representatives have access to data from the MEQ which forms part of the discussion on how to improve student experience and the CPPR requires input from the appropriate level of student representative. Work is ongoing in partnership between the University and NSU to train student representatives to participate fully in both to ensure student representatives are seen as experts in their experience.

Student Outcomes

Student Outcomes are a difficult area for the student submission to address as by nature our focus is on the current lived experience of students, not their progression or success post-graduation. In this submission we have focused on those areas that students have historically perceived as having most impact in these areas, over and above the previous section on student experience.

Inclusion and Accessibility

Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Attainment Gap:

Northumbria's student population is reflective of the regional population and BAME groups represent a small cohort in the overall undergraduate population. This is reflected in our focus groups and GOAL days whose undergraduate participants were overwhelmingly white UK. The University's data on good honours achievement highlights this as a persistent issue which remains a priority for NSU in our Quality Review.

The Union notes over the past five years the University has significantly increased resource and commitment to addressing the attainment gap which we hope will lead to a closure of attainment gap for future years. Actions include

- Investment in the University's Student and Library Services to provide more learning and careers support for students from BAME backgrounds.

- Greater transparency of EDI data with a new structure drawing across the University to identify and address EDI issues including champions at senior level. The Deputy Vice Chancellor leads on the Race Equality Charter an indication of the University commitment.
- Creation of Faculty leads for EDI and Access, Participation and Progress work to ensure local provision is reviewed and supported.
- Committing to achieve the Race Equality Charter, introducing work streams on decolonising the curriculum and launching innovative projects such as Student Inclusion Consultants recruiting students from communities that face barriers to work with University staff to design solutions and internal funding rounds for innovative projects to develop and showcase best practice.

Disability:

As noted, we commend the work on the Inclusion team and the University approach to supporting students with learning disabilities and those with other disabilities. University data on degree outcomes shared through its Diversity Dashboard show that the attainment gap for these two groups and students with no reported disability is less than 5% in recent years and in some years may exceed the latter in terms of good honours. [Northumbria Good Honours Dashboard]

Student origin:

The provider submission highlights the number of students who come to Northumbria from areas with multiple deprivation and/or traditionally low participation in higher education, typically from the Northeast. Commending the work done NSU would particularly draw attention to the beneficial impact that Foundation years appears to have had on student outcomes which is now feeding through to increased participation in Level 7 and 8 study. While this is not causation, it is reasonable to assume that this recent growth in continuation to further study would not have happened had those students not been successfully started on an undergraduate programme through their foundation.

Progression to employment

Northumbria University has made student and graduate employability a strategic priority in recent years, as demonstrated by the emphasis on this topic in both the employability strand of the university's strategic plan and its new Education Strategy.

In 2021, Northumbria was re-accredited and remains the only regional institution to hold the Small Business Charter Award, which recognizes its support for start-ups, students, and small businesses. Additionally, the university's Business Clinic and on-campus Incubator hub were given exemplar status in their latest submission. We applaud Northumbria for its business clinic and offer to students who wish to work alongside SMES and charities.

On the SEF GOAL Day, 77% of undergraduates responding students agreed or strongly agreed that "*The University supports me to succeed and progress beyond my studies*" citing opportunities to develop employability skills, resources including assessment test practice, the Student Law Office, employability talks and seminars, job fairs and employment days, placement workshops, personal statement and CV workshops, volunteering opportunities, guest speakers and external company talks, online resources, and key skills embedded into employability modules as reasons for their positive score.

This positive feedback reflects the University own data in their submission of the statistical shift in students who reported feeling career readiness from 2021 to 2022 and the impact in the Graduate Outcomes Survey 2019/20 and Longitudinal Educational Outcomes Survey 2019/20 which shows Northumbria is the highest ranked NE university for graduates in sustained employment one year after graduation.

Educational Gains

Again, this is difficult for students to articulate as they experience the process through their education. We reference the provider submission which highlights the graduate characteristics built into the PFNA, where development of those characteristics is a central part of programme design.

Conclusion

Having reviewed the plethora of information available to us, my conclusion is that others for whom Northumbria has had a profound impact on the course of their life. It continues to be an excellent provider of higher education, with strong standards and excellent practice across a diverse portfolio. As importantly it has a culture and commitment to continuous improvement rooted in student feedback and success. With its new Education Strategy, I believe the University has potential to extend its impact to new generations across all aspects of its provision.