Section 1: Approach to evidence-gathering

Our approach to this submission and the team behind the submission

This submission has been compiled and submitted by the Queen Mary Students' Union President, with support from the Student Voice team in the Students' Union, including the Student Voice Intern (a current student employed by Students' Union to run research projects within the area of student voice).

The Students' Union President is democratically elected to represent all students at Queen Mary University of London (QMUL). The President is one of six full-time officers in the Students' Union, and a key aspect of the President's role is to work closely with other elected representatives, such as the School Representatives and Course Representatives. This means that the President is well placed to represent all Queen Mary students across academic areas and levels of study.

The creation of this submission has been aligned with the Students' Union's values, which include *student-led* and *transparent*. To ensure the submission is student-led, the President has used his experience as an elected representative to set the direction for the submission. Further, the submission is directly based on evidence from students, and the Student Voice Intern (a current student) has been directly involved in the data analysis and write-up. By explicitly stating how the data has been collected and analysed, and limitations of the data, we aim to be as transparent as possible.

Data included in this submission

The Students' Union is student-led, and it has been of great importance for us to ensure this submission is based on feedback directly from students. We have therefore based the submission on student feedback from three major student surveys, and where relevant, we have supported it with data from other sources such as ad hoc feedback from students and student representatives, email queries and internal records. Table 1 provides an overview of different data sources that have been used. For all the data sources, we have only included data from undergraduate students (if the data set included data from other levels of study, these have been excluded before the data was analysed).

Data source	Data collection period	Type of data	Sample characteristics
Glow Up survey	March and April 2022	All-student online survey conducted by the Students' Union. The data was collected for the purpose of strategy development, and the data has therefore been re-analysed (thematic analysis of qualitative comments) for the purpose of this submission.	2711 responses from undergraduates (responses from non-undergraduate students have been excluded for the purpose of this submission). Sample includes data from a wide range of subsets of the student population: Females: 64.3% Males: 34.5% Other genders: 1.2% UK students: 69.0% Non-UK students: 31.0%

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			Science & Engineering: 37.7%
			Medicine and Dentistry: 16.6%
			Humanities and Social Sciences: 45.6%
TEF Course Rep survey	November and December 2022	Online survey for undergraduate Course Reps. The survey was split into two sets of questions about student experience and student outcomes. Each respondent was either given questions about student experience or questions about student outcomes.	40 responses in total (20 for the student experience questions and 20 for the student outcomes questions). Respondents from all three faculties.
Spaces survey	November 2022	All-student online survey conducted in partnership between the Students' Union President and colleagues in the university's Estates & Facilities team.	1396 responses from undergraduates (responses from non-undergraduate students have been excluded for the purpose of this submission).
Feedback from Course Reps	Since July 2021	Feedback raised by the Course Reps (either brought to the attention of the Students' Union by the Course Reps themselves or through our monitoring of student-staff liaison committee minutes).	Feedback received from all academic schools.
Students' Union records	Since July 2021	Internal Students' Union records of student feedback and student enquiry topics.	Records cover the types of topics that students contact the Students' Union about, including issues that have been raised directly with the full-time representatives in the Students' Union.

Table 1: Overview of data sources

Independence and limitations of the student submission

We have maintained independence from the university, and staff from the university have not been involved in the setting of questions, research planning or write up of this student submission. They have offered relevant and appropriate support and data, and they have kept us updated about the topics they have covered in their submission. We can confirm that the University did not unduly influence the content of the submission.

As outlined in table 1, the data sources that have been used range from large-scale student surveys to informally collected student feedback. We acknowledge that the robustness of the data varies by source, and as such, we have built this submission around our strongest data source; the Glow Up survey. We then used the other data sources to add nuances and depth to the findings from the Glow Up survey. As such, we are confident that the student submission reflects recent feedback from a large sample of the student population. Where there are limitations to the conclusions that we are able to draw from the data, we have explicitly stated this.

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Section 2: Student experience

Introduction

The data from the Glow Up Survey was collected with the purpose of developing the Students' Union's new strategy, and the survey therefore covered a range of topics, including some that are out of scope for this submission. We have therefore re-analysed the data focusing on data that is relevant for this submission.

In the Glow Up survey, we asked students to select the biggest issues they have faced (each respondent could select up to three issues). Many of the most frequently selected issues are outside of scope of this submission, but the following issues were ranked as some of the biggest issues undergraduates are facing:

- Feeling stressed or overwhelmed (selected by 45.89% of respondents)

- Assessments and exams (selected by 27.85% of respondents)

- Struggling academically (selected by 14.75% of respondents)

- Problems related to the quality of teaching (selected by 17.96% of respondents)

We also gave the respondents the opportunity to provide free-text comments with things they would like to change if they had the power to change one thing about their university experience. This data provided a wide range of responses relating to teaching quality, academic support and the learning environment, and we have undertaken a thematic analysis of these comments to enable us to identify patterns and understand the issues students are facing in relation to their educational experience.

In this section, we will summarise the feedback students provided about teaching quality, assessments and exams, feedback, academic support and the learning environment. Where relevant, we will supplement the findings from the Glow Up survey with data from the TEF Course Rep survey (specifically the questions about student experience), the Spaces Survey, feedback from reps and data from Students' Union records.

Teaching quality and mixed-mode education

With almost a fifth of students saying that problems related to the quality of teaching were one of the three biggest issues they have faced, it is clear that teaching quality continues to be a major area of improvement. However, we also want to acknowledge that the university has invested heavily in improving teaching quality in recent years. Positive initiatives include the establishment of the Queen Mary Academy (and all the work the Academy has already undertaken to improve assessments, teaching and the wider educational experience), increased focus on teaching qualifications and improved quality assurance mechanisms (for example, the new process for Enhanced Programme Reviews). Many of these initiatives have been established recently, and as such, we expect the full impact to not have been realised yet.

When discussing teaching quality, it is necessary to address the impact of the pandemic; not only has it had an impact on students, it has also had an impact on staff.

When the Glow Up data was collected (spring 2022), the final government restrictions relating to the pandemic were in the process of being removed, and the university's ambition was that all students should have some elements of on-campus teaching. However, the Glow Up data revealed a significant number of students that claimed their course was still fully online. Most comments on this topic argued for more on-campus teaching and learning activities, but a smaller number of respondents noted how beneficial they had found online learning (for example, because online teaching has the potential to lower transport costs for commuter students and enable students with disabilities or long-term health conditions to participate). It would be easy to argue that since a majority of respondents were in favour of on-campus teaching, all teaching should be delivered as traditional on-campus teaching, but this would mean that certain subsets of the student population would suffer and miss out on the benefits that mixed-mode education offers in terms of flexibility and personalisation of the learner journey.

In this academic year, Students' Union representatives have continued to work with colleagues in the university to ensure mixed-mode education meets the needs of all students, and we are confident that the university has taken appropriate steps towards implementing mixed-mode education.

With this context in mind, it is difficult for us as a Students' Union to see that student feedback reports that teaching staff should be more engaged and passionate, some students have the impression that their teachers dislike teaching and other students feel that their teachers are reluctant to innovate and try new teaching methods. These types of comments came from students across academic areas, but Science & Engineering appeared to be over-represented compared to the sample size. As a Students' Union, we have seen teaching staff working incredibly hard during the pandemic to transform teaching methods and learn to use new technologies to suit the online environment. When lockdowns were lifted, we have seen how teaching staff have then quickly had to learn new teaching methods and learn to use new technologies once again – this time to adapt to mixed-mode education. As such, we understand why some teaching staff feel exhausted and burned out, and we know many students actively support staff in their fight for better working conditions (the Students' Union's Annual Members Meeting in November 2022 was attended by over 300 students who voted to support UCU's industrial action).

Our role as a Students' Union is to be the voice of students, even when this means that we have to bring up negative feedback and have difficult conversations, and we would not be doing our job if we ignored that some students feel that teaching quality is such a big issue that this would be their number one priority to change if they had the power to do so. At the same time, we want to make it clear that the solution is not to place further requirements on already overworked teaching staff. Instead, we ask for the university to work collaboratively with staff to ensure working conditions are supportive and workloads are manageable.

Assessments and exams

Within the Glow Up data set, students from every school raised concerns about assessments and exams. This is also supported by the quantitative data, where assessments and exams were one of the most frequent issues that students had experienced (selected by 27.85% of respondents). Students mainly feel concerned about the type, frequency and feedback on assessments, overall noting that the way assessments are conducted does not support students' learning as they should. For example, students on some courses don't have access to marking guides and past paper examples, which makes it difficult for students to understand how they will be assessed. Students argue that this lack of clarity makes it difficult for them to prepare appropriately and caused unnecessary worries and anxiety. In terms of the style of assessments, feedback concerned a lack of variety in assessment type, unclear examination criteria and the type of questions within exams.

This data is in line with data from internal Students' Union records, where we have noted a steep rise in concerns raised by elected representatives about the method, mode and frequency of assessments this academic year, in particular from Economics & Finance, Engineering & Materials Science and Physical & Chemical Sciences. Many of the representatives have requested that the Students' Union should lobby for the university to revert to online assessments, provide improved guidance such as writing guides and to rebalance the weighting of different assessment elements, or some students experiencing assessments an 'excessive' frequency. In response to this feedback, our Faculty VPs (full-time elected representatives) have been lobbying for improved guidance. This has been one of the most dominant areas of concern this academic year, with more than 30 direct emails and open letters from students to elected representatives and the Student Voice Team.

The university's own data relating to the number of academic misconduct cases also indicate that the approach to assessment requires improvements. In 2018/2019, 1.4% of the student population were involved in (alleged) cases of academic misconduct. In 2021/2022, this number had increased to 4.5% of the student population. We fully recognise that it is unlikely that academic misconduct cases can be fully eliminated, but given this spike in cases, we believe current assessment practices and support systems are failing a significant proportion of students.

Feedback

Linked to the concerns about assessments and exams, the Students' Union is also aware of a long-standing concern from the Course Reps about the quality of feedback. The primary concern with feedback is that it is impersonal, short and difficult to learn from.

The dissatisfaction with feedback was very notable in the TEF Course Rep survey. The question "I receive timely and constructive feedback that supports me in later assessments and learning" received the lowest average score (3.1) of all the questions in the survey, the lowest number of *strongly agree* responses (10% of responses) and highest number of *strongly disagree (10% of responses)*. This is clearly the biggest concern for Course Reps for the features we asked about. Furthermore, this was also a theme in the responses to the free text question "What has been the biggest issue in your educational experience at QMUL?" in the TEF Course Rep survey. The most common theme in the responses related to assessments, and we consider the following quote illustrative of the main concern across many schools and faculties:

"Receiving feedback on any assignment is NEVER on time; even my exam results were not released on time and i had to call SEMS office [the student's School's administrative office] many times to receive an answer; in most modules practice questions are not provided and you have to guess how the theory will be developed in exam questions".

Academic support and the learning environment

Within the thematic analysis of the Glow Up data, responses regarding academic support and the learning environment were one of the most frequently mentioned areas. It is particularly notable that while we had responses from every school within this theme, almost half of the responses within this theme related to two academic areas: Medicine & Dentistry and Engineering & Materials Sciences. The largest concern students had was a lack of academic support, including the quality, amount and manner of academic support that students receive. The data shows a concerning lack of academic support from teaching staff, and a disconnect between students and specialist academic support services, such as support for study skills. It was not uncommon to see comments calling for new support services to be introduced, but as a Students' Union, we know that these services already exist. It is positive that the university has invested in academic support services in recent years, but the feedback highlights that a lack of awareness prevents students from taking advantage of these services.

For the purpose of this submission, we have gathered further information to try to understand why students in some academic areas appear to be less satisfied with the academic support they receive. The relevant full-time elected representative suggested that the concerns about academic support in Medicine & Dentistry could reflect that this academic area uses a different system than other areas. MedPro, 'Medical Professionalism', is a programme which serves as academic and pastoral support for medical students. While the programme is supposed to allocate one on one tutors for every student, this has not been the case in the past year due to a shortage of tutors. Due to the problems with this system, we are aware of discussion to move to the same system for academic support as the rest of the university, but student feedback on this idea has not been positive, and the issue remains unresolved.

The feedback from the TEF Course Rep survey highlighted how important academic support is, and how big an impact it can have when it is working well. In this survey, several respondents chose to highlight the impact of academic support on their learning experience. In response to the following statement: "I know what academic support is available and know how to access it", 50% of respondents agreed, and a further 30% strongly agreed, making this the strongest response out of all the surveys. This was further explained in the responses to the free text question "What's the best thing about your educational experience at QMUL?", where a common theme was support services, including Disability and Dyslexia Service (DDS) or Advice and Counselling. A quote demonstrating this is:

"My support from my personal adviser and the help I've been receiving from DDS. Friendly initiatives such as the breakfast club and other events with [School] have made me more confident with interacting with my peers/members of staff".

While at a glance this may appear contradictory to the feedback from the Glow Up survey, it may be indicative of Course Reps' awareness and ability to access additional forms of support, as Course Reps are trained to navigate the university services and signpost other students to relevant sources of support.

In addition to the Glow Up data about academic support, a small number of comments also related to the physical learning environment and access to resources. The most common requests within this area were additional online resources, improved library and study spaces and better facilities for practice-based learning. In acknowledging this as an important issue, the Students' Union President collaborated with colleagues from the university's Estates and Facilities team to conduct the Spaces survey in the first semester of 2022/2023. Results from the survey allow us to better understand how students use spaces and how spaces can be improved. The survey results showed that students are generally satisfied with more traditional types of spaces, such as spaces for lectures (satisfaction rate of 75.47%) and seminars (65.05%) and quiet study spaces (55.82%). In contrast, practice-based learning spaces scored much lower, with laboratory or workshop spaces (44.49% satisfaction rate), meeting rooms (39.21%), performance, events or exhibition spaces (32.30%) and clinical spaces (30.51%) all scoring satisfaction rates below 50%. In light of the increased use of mixed-mode education and the university's ambition to encourage 'learning by doing' (part of the Active Curriculum for Excellence), these survey results suggest a significant challenge in ensuring that the learning environment effectively facilitates non-traditional forms of teaching and learning.

Student voice

Throughout this submission, we have given examples of projects where we have worked collaboratively with the university to make improvements to the benefit of the students we represent. Examples include the Spaces Survey, the implementation of mixed-mode education and graduate attributes (see section 3 about student outcomes). These examples are only a few of the many projects where elected student representatives work collaboratively with university staff members to explore problems and develop solutions together. In general, we feel many staff members (academics as well as professional services) across levels of seniority and areas of expertise have a genuine interest in listening to the student voice and working collaboratively with students.

We are, however, also aware of areas of the university where student voice is less embedded or student representatives report that their involvement feels tokenistic. The TEF Course Rep survey illustrates these local differences well; respondents were asked to what extent they agree with the following statement: "I feel the university listens to my input as a representative and involves me in making improvements to my course", and responses ranged from *disagree* (10% of responses) to *completely agree* (15% of responses).

Section 3: Student outcomes

Introduction

As noted in the TEF Student Submission guidance document, the Students' Union has not been able to collect data from alumni for the purpose of this submission. For this reason, this section focuses on how well current students feel supported to succeed and progress into their chosen career path.

Opportunities for skills development

Overall, our data suggests that the majority of students are satisfied with the opportunities they have to develop their skills and prepare for life after graduation. In the Glow Up survey, only 10.25% said that not having enough opportunities to develop their skills was one of the three biggest issues they had experienced, making it the 11th most frequently selected issue. Although this data shows that a minority of students don't feel they have enough opportunities to develop their skills, it is a comparatively small issue.

This is also supported by the TEF Course Rep survey, where Course Reps on average responded positively to all the questions. In the TEF Course Rep survey, we asked Course Reps to what extent they agreed with

five statements. The scale ranged from completely disagree (1) to completely agree (5), and the average scores were above 3.5 for all five statements (see table 2).

Statement	Average score (1=completely disagree, 5=completely agree)
I feel my degree prepares me well for life after graduation	3.9
My course has helped me develop relevant *academic* skills which are relevant to my potential career path	3.95
My course has helped me develop relevant* personal* and *employability* skills which are relevant to my chosen career path	3.95
I am given a range of *opportunities* to develop the skills and knowledge I need to be successful in my chosen career	3.80
I know how to access guidance about my future career or future studies, and feel able to do so	3.80

Table 2: TEF Course Rep survey average scores

Types of support

We recognise that skills development is only one aspect of supporting students to succeed and progress into graduate employment or further studies, the data from the TEF Course Rep survey indicates that that survey respondents feel prepared for life after graduation and know where to seek support.

The analysis of the qualitative comments from the TEF Course Rep survey allows us to gain a better understanding of how students value different initiatives to support them to prepare for life after graduation. When we asked *Are there any initiatives or activities that have been particularly valuable in helping you to prepare for life after graduation?*, it was notable that most respondents chose to mention extracurricular activities, including those provided by the Students' Union and the Careers & Enterprise team in the university.

It is positive that respondents value the opportunities and support that are made available to them outside of the curriculum (e.g. through the Students' Union and Careers & Enterprise), but it also highlights that more work should be done to ensure that support is embedded into the curriculum. As a Students' Union, we have worked closely with colleagues in the university to identify graduate attributes for Queen Mary programmes and create a framework for embedding these into the curriculum of all programmes. However, the data from the Course Reps raises questions about how well this project has been implemented in different parts of the university.

Barriers to success and progression

While our data suggests that many students feel they are given adequate opportunities to develop their skills and prepare for life after graduation, we are also aware of a number of barriers that prevent smaller subsets of the student population from taking advantage of the opportunities that are available to them. From our conversations with students, we know that many different barriers exist, and different demographic groups are affected differently by these barriers. As such, we recognise that it would be difficult to ensure that no student experiences any barriers to progression. However, in this submission we wish to highlight three barriers that are preventing students from succeeding and progressing to their chosen career path.

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Firstly, the analysis of the Glow Up data highlighted that a minority of students feel unable to engage with extracurricular activities and skills development opportunities due to their financial situation. 18.33% of respondents said that financial hardship was one of the three biggest issues they have experienced. In the qualitative comments, several students elaborated on the impact their financial issues are having on their experience – due to their financial issues, students have to undertake significant amounts of paid work (often in low-paid jobs with limited opportunities for development of graduate skills). This limits the time they have available to excel academically, take on a role of responsibility or take part in skills development opportunities. Much of the data concerned international students and those from low-income households. These responses noted how international students could not access domestic student loans and therefore were often reliant on part-time work. While the university provides financial support packages, the data suggests that there are gaps in the financial support system, and these gaps lead to affected students feeling unable to fully engage with the opportunities that are available to them, leaving them feeling less prepared for life after graduation.

Secondly, over the last few years, we have seen a significant increase in academic misconduct cases. This has led to a significant backlog in the resolution to allegations and accusations, and poor communication with students in relation to their cases has created major issues for student progression. Specifically, the backlog means that students are waiting for several months for their case to be resolved, and the Students' Union has seen an unusually high number of enquiries from students that are frustrated by the lack of communication about their case and the impact the delay is having on their ability to continue their studies or move into graduate employment. We are aware of cases where students have been unable to accept offers of graduate level employment, because their final transcript isn't available, as well as cases where students have missed the deadline for applying for a graduate route visa to work in the UK. For these students, the delays in the resolution of cases have been life changing.

For non-final year students, the delays can severely impact their ability to continue their studies. We are aware of students that have waited until week 8 of the first term of the new academic before finding out they are no longer on the course. Sometimes these students have participated in their course as normal and signed rental agreements based on their continued study. This is having a major impact on not only the outcomes for these students but their wellbeing as well.

As a Students' Union, we have repeatedly raised these issues with the university, but we are concerned about the number of students that continue to seek support from the Students' Union in relation to this problem (in particular, because it is likely that we only see a small fraction of the total number of students that are affected). While we believe it is essential for the university to address the backlog in cases, we are concerned that this will not solve the underlying problem that has caused the increase in academic misconduct cases.

We do currently not hold any data that allows us to understand the full nature of this problem, but Course Reps frequently raise concerns about over-assessment, poor planning of deadlines and a lack of support for students that are struggling with their assessments. Without a plan for how the university will explore and address these underlying issues, we fear that even higher numbers of students will be unable to succeed and progress in years to come.

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