

## University of Essex SU - Student TEF Submission

Hello. I am one of elected officers that leads the University of Essex Students' Union. I represent all students on all three campuses at the University of Essex in all matters relating to their education. This report has been guided by around 15,000 responses that we have collected from students over the last two years. I've tried to make the following submission as useful and comprehensive as possible so thanks in advance for reading it, I hope you find it useful in providing students' perspective on education at Essex.

### A bit of background on us

The Students' Union (SU) was set up by students in 1964, the same year that the University of Essex was founded as a daring and student-centric alternative to traditional universities at that time. Over the following 59 years the Union has grown significantly and now represents the interests of more than 17,000 student members across three Essex campuses. We place student feedback at the heart of everything we do and believe passionately in giving our members the tools to shape what happens around them, particularly their education. This is reflected in our ambitious vision as a student collective (to become '*The World's Most Student-Centred Organisation*') and our student-led values, or tattoos as we call them (*Powered by students, Always Challenge, No Bullshit, Work hard, play hard and Shoulder to shoulder*), which guide everything that we do.

Our approach to representing our members is also distinctive; our sabbatical officers do not get elected on the basis of a manifesto, but on how capable they are of effectively delivering on the priorities that have been chosen by our students through a large-scale consultation exercise called The Big Plan. This has had a massive impact in fostering a culture of more relevant, united and successful delivery on priorities that as many students as possible have had a say each year in selecting. Successes of this approach so far have included the introduction of 24/7 opening for the University library, removing printing fees, and a £2m package of support to help Essex students with the cost of living crisis.

Through the SU our members directly influence their educational and wider university experience in a range of ways. We support students in holding leadership positions with the power to shape things, including elected sabbatical officers, Student Community Officers, elected members of Student Parliament, and academic course reps (providing coverage of all departments). Together these students represent a diverse range of individuals and communities, allowing the Union to continuously gather feedback and represent their interests.

### Our working relationship with the University

We are proud of the excellent working relationship that we have with the University and that there is a clear, shared commitment to listening and working with students to continually improve all aspects of the Essex experience. Each term of office starts with presenting The Big Plan to the University's senior staff team and discussing how we can achieve these student priorities by working together. While we work in partnership I've been pleased to see that our independence is supported and we have clear freedom to disagree and challenge (which we do, regularly) whilst still being listened to.

The SU President meets regularly with both the Vice Chancellor and Registrar

'huddle' meetings are also held weekly between University and SU staff, allowing us to review live student feedback as it comes in and immediately progress any actions arising. This has had a big impact in allowing us to really quickly respond to student issues, concerns and ideas. SU officers are also members of all key University committees including Council, Senate and Education Committee, and work closely with the University to expand the student membership beyond Sabbatical Officer representation. Committees now include student rep convenors who represent student viewpoints from across the three faculties and at postgraduate level.

### **Creating this submission – our approach to evidence gathering**

Understanding and accurately representing the interests and experience of our student members is our core work as a SU. In preparation for this TEF submission we have considered a vast range of student feedback that we have collected from multiple data sources, alongside consultation with student representatives and staff.

In order to provide a thorough, evidence-based student submission the data that we have chosen to draw on most is our extensive range of student surveys, which represent the honest views of thousands of Essex undergraduate students. Each academic year our schedule of regular surveys helps us to gain a deep understanding of the student experience and we have supported this with further evidence-gathering survey work conducted specifically to inform elements of this submission. The student survey data used to directly inform this submission includes the following:

Name of Survey	Date	Respondents
First impressions of teaching (reviewing teaching quality)	Nov 2022	1557
Personal Tutors Term 1 (reviewing academic support systems)	Dec 2021	1041
Personal Tutors Term 2 (reviewing academic support systems)	Feb 2022	838
Personal Tutors Term 3 (reviewing academic support systems)	Dec 2022	1173
But seriously how are you? (reviewing student welfare and wellbeing)	Nov 2021	2083
But seriously how are you? (reviewing student welfare and wellbeing)	Dec 2022	1824
But seriously how are you? (reviewing student welfare and wellbeing)	Mar 2021	2127
But seriously how are you? (reviewing student welfare and wellbeing)	Mar 2022	1266
Pre-term 2 survey (student satisfaction and motivation)	Jan 2022	826
End of year survey (academic experience, satisfaction and belonging)	Jun 2022	1097
Welcome survey (first year undergraduate experience and satisfaction)	Oct 2022	871

This data has been widely reviewed,

Regular updates on the progress of our submission have also been given to our Student Parliament throughout the course of its collation. Further evidence sources used in this submission are the aforementioned Big Plan data that we collect from students every year to shape our key priorities, as well as the feedback we collect through our network of Student Reps, Student Community Officers and Student Parliament.

## **Section 2: Student Experience**

Throughout the last 3 years the SU has sought to understand our members' academic experiences at Essex. During an unprecedented time for students nationally, we have regularly asked students about their experiences of teaching, learning and wider support opportunities.

### **Covid – How it affected our students**

The Covid 19 pandemic understandably had a major effect on the experiences of our members. As the SU our overriding aim was to understand what our members were going through in order to support them effectively during the pandemic. The University responded swiftly to our feedback on behalf of students and we were able to work closely with them to ensure communications to students at this time occurred both in a timely manner and provided students with the information and reassurance they needed.

We particularly commend the University's "no detriment" approach taken during the pandemic, which ensured that no student was disadvantaged in their studies as a result of changes made to their educational experience. Throughout the pandemic, we were very keen to understand our members experiences of teaching within a blended learning environment and created our "first impressions of teaching" survey that we still run today. Prior to the pandemic we had feedback from members that the online education space was inconsistent. The University acted on this feedback, improving their consistency as they moved teaching online and creating a Moodle baseline template that is still in use today. Whilst there were occasions throughout the pandemic when we didn't always agree over the best course of action, it was clear that the University's priority was the safety of students.

### **Teaching, feedback and assessment practices**

Ensuring that students have a transformational education is a core principle for the University and we have seen a range of teaching, feedback and assessment practices used to ensure students have the best opportunities to succeed.

Our research on student understanding of assessment and feedback, conducted as part of the 2022 end of year survey, saw 1096 responses from students across three campuses. The highest response rate for this survey came from the faculty of Science and Health (42.8%), followed by Social Sciences (33.5%) and Humanities (22.8%).

Within this context we are pleased that the University is continuing to look at ways to improve student feedback. Current university policy states that students should receive feedback from assignments within 20 working days. Through our membership of university committees, we are working with colleagues to see how feedback can be returned as quickly as possible whilst ensuring it remains of the highest quality.

We look forward to continuing to work with the University on ensuring that improving assessment and feedback practices remains a priority.

The pandemic saw the University make significant changes to examination methods, including assessments being moved online and a move to open-book exams. Our students are very pleased that many of these elements have been retained following a return to face-to-face teaching, particularly the retention of open book examinations where appropriate. University guidance states open-book exams should be the default examination method, unless specific approval has been

granted for pedagogical reasons or to meet PSRB requirements. As a consequence of this, our latest data shows that 75% of examinations this year will be open-book. This is a move we support on behalf of our members, however departments must prepare students for the face-to-face element of these examinations, to ensure they have the best possible chance of success.

### **Course content and delivery**

In June 2022 we surveyed 1097 students to measure how effectively the University's teaching, learning and assessment practices support student confidence in their academic skills. Our highest response rates came from students in Essex Business School followed by Life Science and Health and Social Care. In total 74.8% of respondents stated they felt either confident or very confident about their academic skills.

In November 2022 we ran our third annual "First Impressions of Teaching" survey. We received 1557 responses from students. Our highest responses came from students studying within the faculty of Science and Health (41%) followed by the faculty of Social Sciences (38%) and Arts and Humanities (21%). The survey showed that 88% of students who responded were satisfied with their first impressions of teaching. Students were asked a series of free-text questions and a high number of comments referenced satisfaction with course content and delivery, for example:

- "Lecturers are knowledgeable, kind and engaging"
- "Lecturers make classes interactive"
- "The teaching style and material is superb"
- "The Professors are passionate about what they teach which makes listening to them interesting"

Significant further evidence of student opinion on these points can be found in our end of year survey (published August 2022) where 82% of students were satisfied with their experience at the University in the preceding academic year. 1096 students responded to the survey across all campuses, faculties and departments. The highest response was again from the faculty of Science and Health (43%) followed by Social Sciences (34.2%) and Arts and Humanities (22.8%). A number of positive comments mentioned the University's approach to both content and delivery:

- "The quality of teaching and the academic freedom."
- "The best thing to me is the support I got from everyone that crossed my path, from my tutors, librarian, SU advice, colleagues, and everyone."
- "Getting to experience the best possible services from the staff at University and learning a wide range of skills from our tutors."
- "The best thing about Essex is engaging with lectures in the hall and being able to participate in debates."

Further evidence from our 2021 pulse survey on what students were most looking forward to in term 2 indicates that "returning to their studies" was the most prominent factor in why students were positive about returning to university following the winter break.

### **Research and the effect on the academic experience**

The University regularly references its role as a dual intensive institution committed to research-led education that develops critical, analytical and transferable skills for all undergraduates. Student

feedback we received to our end of year survey (1096 students) indicates that students value this approach. Through the survey we asked “What was the best thing about the University of Essex?”

A selection of this feedback is included below:

- “My favourite part of my student experience was my exposure to unique and thought-provoking modules, taught by impassioned lecturers that inspired me to learn and research further.”
- “The people I’ve met and the teaching/research.”
- “The contact times with the lecturers and the ability to talk outside of lectures with them about their research”
- “The lecturer’s enthusiasm for their research topics”

### **Professional development of staff**

As a Union we have first-hand experience of work undertaken by the University that seeks to recognise and promote best practise and contribute to helping drive professional development. A very recent example was the 2022 “Celebrating Excellence in Education Awards”, which we worked with the University on to recognise outstanding educators across the University. Central to the awards are the student-nominated categories, where students put forward names of teaching staff who have inspired them during their time at Essex.

We were invited to contribute to this event and it was inspiring to see lecturers being recognised by staff and students. Given that the University recruits staff of on a combination of both teaching and research skills we are pleased that moving forward, students will be involved in this recruitment process through micro-teaching panels.

### **Teaching quality**

We firmly believe that student feedback should be at the heart of improving teaching quality. In addition to the mechanisms already in place through our student voice networks and other live feedback opportunities, the SU believes that to achieve further improvements in teaching quality we need to see a standardised, anonymous feedback system in place for all students on all modules, a review of peer-observation practise, and a widening of the emphasis on excellence through scaling-up of teaching awards. The feedback we’ve collected from students would also suggest that a more transparent monitoring of teaching quality is required centrally so that students can more easily see how this is regularly being reviewed and improved.

### **The learning environment**

The University aims to ensure that a supportive learning environment is created for all students, whether in classes, laboratories, study spaces, the library or the virtual learning environment. A key element in achieving this has been the University’s personal tutoring system which aims to support student’s academic journey. All students are assigned a Personal Tutor and as an SU we have been working with the University to independently monitor the effectiveness of the programme, gathering student feedback on personal tutoring since 2019. In our most recent Personal Tutor pulse survey (November 2022) we asked 1173 undergraduates if they had met their Personal Tutor.

Whilst we have seen an increase in the numbers of students who have met with their Personal Tutor, this is still well short of the numbers we would expect to see. In response, the University have made personal tutoring an institutional priority and have commissioned a pilot project (in Economics, Philosophy, and Computer Science) increasing the resource available to run the Personal Tutor programme in order to increase its effectiveness.

Moving forward, the SU would like to see a plan showing how positive outcomes from the trial will be implemented across all departments in the next academic year.

### **Physical and virtual learning resources**

Our members talk positively about the learning environment at Essex. The 2021/22 NSS results highlight student satisfaction in this area, with 83.18% of students satisfied with the learning resources available. This is above the sector average of 80.9%. In 2018 the SU worked closely with the University to open the library 24 hours a day, thus drastically increasing the hours in a day that students could study in a safe, stimulating environment. The library continues to look at ways to innovate and improve its provision for students. This academic year, in conjunction with the Union's Big Plan it has increased the time students can borrow laptops from 3 to 6 hours. This is a welcome move, particularly at a time of economic hardship for many of our students.

Virtual learning resources have also developed in recent years and we are pleased that some of the innovations that were developed as a result of the response to the pandemic have been retained by the University. This includes online reading lists for core modules, which are now at 100% availability, and increased accessibility to Listen Again materials, allowing students to revisit lecture material online.

Students can also track their progress, including monitoring their attendance, time spent in the library and interactions with on-line resources, through the University's Learner Engagement and Activity Portal (LEAP) platform.

A range of surveys completed throughout the last two years give us further insight into why students are satisfied with the learning resources available to them. In the 2022 End of year and 'First impressions of teaching' surveys, "learning resources" was the second most popular reason given for student satisfaction (after teaching quality) within free text questions. Comments included:

- "The best thing about the University is the resources they provide"
- "[The] Library is very good and very quick to respond to queries. Lots of books available"
- "How much extra support/ classes/ facilities were available"
- "Being able to watch lectures back if they have been missed."

We would encourage the University to continue to review its space management practices, particularly on our Southend campus, ensuring the teaching spaces continue to increase in line with the ever-growing student population on the campus.

### **Engagement with students**

The University engages with its students using both formal and informal methods. As an SU we are a partner in the student voice systems of the University and are responsible for the training, recruitment and support of student reps. Each term all 20 departments at the University host Student Voice Groups, providing a formal mechanism for student reps to share feedback and collaborate with departments to find solutions to issues. This is also an opportunity for students to share positive feedback and ensure good practice is maintained and built on.

The best examples of Student Voice Groups occur when the SU and departments work collaboratively to encourage the student rep system to flourish.

An area of focus of



both the University and the SU over the coming year is to ensure students now see change as a result of that feedback. We are pleased that the University is building more “live” feedback mechanisms at department level and we look forward to supporting and promoting these mechanisms where possible going forward.

A significant joint focus for the SU and the University is creating a sense of belonging for students, informed by the Pearson/WonkHE Report on ‘Building Belonging in Higher Education’ and our own research. We first measured belonging in June 2022, with 71% of the 1097 Essex students we surveyed saying they felt they belonged at Essex (compared with the Pearson/WonkHE national benchmark of 69%). We have since been working in partnership with the University on targeted belonging work for this year’s first year intake.

We look forward to continuing to work with the University on continuing to build on this critical belonging work.

### **Section 3: Student Outcomes**

#### **Supporting students beyond their studies**

At Essex all students are offered multiple ways to succeed in and progress beyond their studies. In April 2021 the University and SU signed up to the Student Futures Manifesto, which provides a framework for a student experience that supports students to develop during and beyond their studies.

At Essex additional support modules, classes and workshops, around academic writing, stats, academic language and referencing are available outside of students’ courses, whilst department-specific employability modules and embedded employability events are available on all courses. Students are offered a central package of careers support, ranging from 1:1 guidance, CV writing workshops, mock interviews and tailored industry specific support, and all final year students are offered the option to benefit from the Generation Essex Graduate Support programme. Progression beyond studies is further supported through activity designed to create direct links between Students and Employers. Events such as the Autumn Careers Festival and career exhibitions are well attended and received positively by students. Engagement data points to the fact that non-UK Undergraduates are in the majority at such events though and highlights a need to focus marketing and engagement strategies on UK Undergraduates going forward.

#### **Continuation**

Since 2020 the continuation rates have been on an upward trajectory, which can be attributed to a focus on building a sense of belonging, an increased emphasis on Learning Communities, focussed work at specific points in the year in conjunction with the SU to ensure there are events and activities to support at risk groups, and continued embedding of the Learner Analytics Engagement Activity Portal. The SU’s “Seriously How Are You?” campaign has also been instrumental in spotting issues early and has seen 9385 respondents tell us how they are doing, with all respondents receiving personalised follow-up in line with how they answered the question.

Essex plans to support students in their educational experience from the moment an individual commits to a degree programme. The Essex Preparation Programme helps students develop key

skills required in higher education in readiness for their studies. The University and SU also collaborate on Student Welcome and Induction, a project that stretches well beyond the first week of term and focusses on belonging and the student academic experience.

As an SU we are keen to measure the impact these programmes have on preparing and engaging students to develop their knowledge and skills. Our Welcome Week survey was sent out to all first-year undergraduates. An impressive 98% of students who completed the survey felt that the University was “welcoming” or “very welcoming”, whilst 85% of students felt they had “settled into life at University” within the first four weeks.

All departments across the University run induction events for new starters, enabling students to learn about their department and understand the support available to them through resources like Skills for Success, the Library and Personal Tutoring. In our Welcome Week survey we asked students to rate these departmental welcome events on a scale of 1-5 (1 being poor and 5 being excellent). The average score for this question was 4.1 showing a positive reaction. Free text comments linked to this survey have given us further insight into the effectiveness of the University’s work to prepare students for a positive academic experience., including the following:

- “(The best thing has been) Induction process and interactions with people from different backgrounds”
- “Being introduced to the course, meeting my new tutors and making new friends have been some of the highlights so far”.
- “I guess it's the helpful nature of everyone I came in contact with. They were always willing to lend a helping hand”
- The best thing to me is the support I got from everyone that crossed my path, from my tutors, librarian, SU advice, colleagues, and everyone.”

The SU has always placed specific emphasis on belonging, pioneering the “SU Heirloom” project in collaboration with the University in 2014. SU Heirloom was directly linked to registration and helped every new student find their place at Essex, connecting them to tailored opportunities that support continuation (for example clubs and societies). In their first week, every new student was walked through an immersive experience explaining what the SU was and the opportunities it had to offer. The final part of the experience was a face-to-face conversation with a member of SU student staff, a peer-led conversation allowing students to voice concerns, ask questions or find out more about life at Essex. The aim of SU Heirloom is to connect students to opportunities and support, whilst helping them feel welcome and increased likelihood of continuation.

Completion has always been an area of strength for Essex. We are constantly looking to build communities of Students, around Demographics, Issues, Interests and Courses. The SU is currently piloting a project in collaboration with the University to try and further develop learning communities within the faculty of Social Sciences in order to prove what is possible. Our regular “But Seriously, How Are You?” Survey is run in November and February and helps identify issues and act accordingly. Staff formally meet weekly to discuss topical issues raised by students as they arise, allowing bespoke communication, action or reaction to address issues early and make decisions that benefit the student experience.

Since 2019 (as a result of issues surrounding the pandemic) the SU has worked to develop a bespoke networking app called Umii. This has been developed from the basic package to a bespoke Essex version through work funded by the University at the request of the SU. Umii helps



students meet each other based on interest, campus location, course, club or society membership. This has been critical to helping students develop and build social capital and engage with each other to foster a sense of belonging. Since its launch 4560 students have used Umii to connect with each other sending over 75,000 messages and creating over 23,000 connections. Even post-pandemic we continue to recommend Umii through our wellbeing campaign ('Seriously, How are you?'), especially for students that feel lonely or are struggling to make friends.

### **Rates of progression**

Progression data is also an area where Essex performs well in comparison to the sector average. There are a number of targeted projects and workstreams that are explicitly designed to support student progression that are outlined within the Education Gains section of this paper. Support is offered to graduates for up to 14 months following their graduation, and is embedded throughout at faculty, department and course level; consistent with the Universities commitment to Equality and Diversity extra targeted support is also available to those who need it most.

The Essex Student Charter requires all students to be an "active participant" in their education and as such The SU and University are in the middle of an exciting new initiative to ensure that all students across all courses, campuses and levels of study are offered multiple opportunities to take a more active lead in their educational experience. In addition to the base level opportunities, for those who are interested, pathways will be created to allow students to have even more say in decisions made that affect the student experience and to define/support project work across the University. Students who engage in this activity will gain great experience and transferrable skills and will feel a deeper ownership to their degree and connection to Essex.

### **Educational gains**

The University states that an Essex education should be transformative, and should inspire you to grow and develop personally, academically and professionally. It sets out its expectations for students in the Essex Skills and Attributes Framework. Additionally, students are asked each year, before they register, to indicate their current thoughts about their future employability plans and the skills they have/need. This data is then used to influence the provision for the upcoming academic year as part of the University's Data informed and Enhancement Led approach. Both the University and the SU are committed to the development of our students and their skills, the Big Essex Award was jointly developed and continues to recognise skills developed through both University and SU activities for inclusion on the HEAR.

Following the most recent Graduate Outcomes data release, the University has also started a program of targeted interventions with groups for whom outcomes are not so favourable, this approach means that targeted comms and support can be made available to those who need it most and to ensure that our students thrive.

### **Supporting achievement**

Throughout their time at Essex, students are given a number of opportunities to build on their social capital, academic and employability skills. The Frontrunner scheme was set up in 2008 as a joint initiative between the SU and the University. It is still going strong today, and is designed for students with no work experience, offering them the opportunity to undertake fixed term projects in a supported environment. Additionally Chart my Path is designed to help students connect skills,

reflect on experiences and build outcomes while The Big Essex award helps students recognise specific experiences and the educational gains they can take from them. Recently pilot projects like “extracted employability” have been implemented to help students find pathways from those degrees where the outcomes are less fixed- ie History degrees leading to Teaching, Archaeology, Curation etc. this is being trialled for students in Law, History, Essex Business School, Maths, Psychology and Literature, Film and Theatre Studies. In a recent survey of our undergraduates, 78% said that they had engaged with one or more of the additional careers services listed.

The SU also offers a number of ways for students to improve their outcomes. We have 120 Societies and 39 Sports Clubs, allowing students to develop personal and professional skills which they can record and reflect on through the Big Essex Award. The SU runs an established, student led, volunteering programme, engaging students in local community projects, student campaigns and activities with local schools on a weekly basis throughout term time. The SU is held to account by members through a Student Parliament representing all modes of study and backgrounds allowing them to build networks, develop communication skills, experience team working and build problem-solving skills to name but a few.

The SU advocates for academic skills development and holds departments to account. Our student reps cover all year groups in all departments and on all campuses, working closely with their peers and the departments to identify issues and suggest improvements through Student Voice Groups and Live Feedback mechanisms to support academic achievement.

In a recent survey of all students across all 3 campuses we asked whether or not students felt that they had developed their skills whilst at Essex. 80% of Students said that they felt they had improved their academic skills and 71% of people said they had developed personally as a result of their time at Essex.

### **Evaluating the gains made by students**

Work in the area of Educational Gains and Graduate Outcomes is monitored through the “Graduate Outcomes Programme” and its associated action plan. This is sent to Education Committee regularly, where student representatives are invited to review progress and suggest changes/revisions. We also have student representation on the HEAR Management Group, Academic Quality & Standards Committee, Faculty Education Committees, Senate and University Council, which receive updates on progress of this and other work mentioned. In our 2022 research we asked students if they knew what the next steps were for them in their journey beyond Essex. Of those who answered positively, 73% said they felt equipped to take those next steps.

### **Closing Remarks**

This concludes the Essex Students’ Submission, on behalf of the SU and its 17,000 members. As I hope this submission demonstrates, we have worked extremely hard to understand and represent the views of our members for a number of years and for this reason, I am confident that this is an accurate depiction of the Essex experience. Should you wish to discuss any content within this submission further or have any feedback for us, please email [VPEducation@essex.ac.uk](mailto:VPEducation@essex.ac.uk).