

Optional student submission TEF 2023

1. Approach to evidence-gathering

The University of Plymouth Students' Union (UPSU) exists to represent all students at the University of Plymouth, ensuring that students have the opportunity to be empowered, learn and grow; be socially fulfilled; feel more financially secure and know they are supported and cared for. We are led by a team of four elected Full-Time Officers, including the Vice President Education who led on the development of this submission. We were supported in the data collation, analysis and write-up of the document by students' union staff and external consultants.

The evidence for the student submission was largely pre-existing, and sources are detailed below. A wide range of student feedback data was analysed to identify key themes, with supplementary evidence drawn from University reports and policies. Additionally, we used the initial data analysis to identify areas to explore further with students and conducted two focus groups specifically for TEF: one exploring the experiences of mature students; and one looking at the experiences of students with disabilities. The lead student officer has reviewed all information, and we are confident that the evidence-led approach we have taken ensures that this submission is a fair reflection of the views of the student body at the University of Plymouth.

The submission was written independently of the University and we can confirm that there was no undue influence over the submission's content. We have worked collaboratively with the University to develop our submissions concurrently, and the University has been very supportive with providing data and advice. The University and Students' Union are clear that the student submission must be independently produced and accurately reflect the views of our students.

1.1 Sources of evidence

Source	Years	Sample	Student mix
National Student Survey 2022	2022	2642 (76%)	Final year UGs
National Student Survey 2022 free text comments	2022	2642 (76%)	Final year UGs
National Student Survey 2021	2021	3003 (75%)	Final year UGs

National Student Survey 2021 free text comments	2021	3003 (75%)	Final year UGs
UPSU Start of Year Survey 2022	2022	440	First year UGs
UPSU Start of Year Survey 2021	2021	1016	First year UGs
UPSU Start of Year Survey 2020	2020	1054	First year UGs
Digital Engagement Survey	2022	340	All students
UPSU Pulse Survey 2022	2022	1,038	UG students
UPSU Pulse Survey 2020	2020	569	UG students
UPSU Pulse Survey 2019	2019	602	UG students
Students with disabilities focus group	2022		UG students
Mature students focus group	2022		UG students
Academic Representation Survey – Course Representatives	2021	214	UG students
Student Staff and Representation Awards - Nominations	2019	NA	UG students

2. Student experience

2.1 Teaching, feedback and assessment (SE1)

The University has a strong record of providing excellent teaching, feedback and assessments. We believe this is evident through NSS results in 2021 and 2022, with 70% and 67% respectively showing satisfaction in feedback and assessments. Equally a UPSU pulse survey (602 respondents) of undergraduate (UG) students in 2019 showed that 87% of respondents said that they were satisfied with their programme and learning experience. Insight from the UPSU pulse survey in 2020 (569 UG respondents) suggested that 76% were satisfied with academic feedback.

As a Students' Union, we work in collaboration with the University by listening to students through the representation system to help improve teaching and assessment, this is fed back through University Teaching Learning and Quality Committee and other academic meetings. Fully trained UPSU Representatives attend key meetings, contributing papers for discussion and approval, ensuring that the voice of students is considered in decision making for all papers. Through the

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Students' Union's annual Student Staff Teaching and Representation Awards (SSTAR) regular feedback is given on the positive impact of the teaching, feedback and assessment practices supporting students.

SSTAR Awards nomination 2019

"Excellent feedback, warm encouragement, and exemplary flexibility. Her feedback on my assessments was excellent – comprehensive, thoughtful, personalised, constructively critical, and encouraging."

"I am very impressed with the consistent and excellent support, guidance and insight she has provided throughout the duration of my project. She has always promptly responded to any questions or concerns that I have had and has been quick to reassure me in times of concern."

2.2 Course design, delivery and quality assurance (SE2)

Through the feedback available to the Students' Union, students say they are broadly positive about their courses, whilst also recognising the challenges. In a 2020 UPSU pulse survey (592 UG respondents) 79% said that they were satisfied with their course and learning experience. We believe that the course design and delivery is of a high standard at Plymouth, but we also recognise challenges that arose due to the transition through Covid and how teaching has had to adjust in time to constantly meet student expectation. This was evident through feedback of our representatives and identified the need for quick adaptations in teaching and learning. The positive reflections of the courses can be seen through how students feel valued on their course, in a 2022 UPSU pulse survey (1,038 UG respondents) 59% of respondents agreed that they felt valued as an individual on their course, with 24% unsure.

Through the NSS data (2022, free text data) students were also positive about the mix of teaching methods on their course, with classroom and field-based elements adding value to their learning.

Student quote from UPSU Starting The Year Survey 2022:

"The course is tough, but the help is excellent. My course is extremely enjoyable and interactive and has like-minded people helping me and being friends with me."

SSTAR Awards nomination 2019

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“They help us to understand anatomy & physiology in a creative way. They use colouring books, skeleton mannequins, and make models out of straws and paper to demonstrate the axial skeleton and planes of movement. They helped me to finally pass the exam which was an integral module of our occupational therapy degree and I'm so very thankful to her for that”

In the UPSU Academic Representation Survey, which was promoted to Course Reps in May 2021, 214 respondents when asked if they are given adequate opportunity to give feedback about their teaching and learning, 39% of said they ‘are given opportunity to feedback about what they need’, 30% said they ‘were given some opportunities and that they are satisfied with the amount’ 22% said they are ‘given some opportunities but that they would like more’.

The majority of free comments in this survey were largely positive with comments such as:

“All senior members of staff present for feedback meetings which is very good as decision makers hear student feedback”

“Staff are aware you're going to be presenting feedback and we have been well prepared to make it useful: suggesting how things could be changed and what's going well. There are a good amount of opportunities and many staff are incredible at receiving and acting on feedback (both at faculty and course level)”

Key themes with regards to the challenges related to giving feedback or regarding the current academic representation system centred around; transparency, volume of feedback and not having enough time to discuss everything, frequency and scheduling of meetings which take place within scheduled lecture time, comments included;

“I think that having a written format to share feedback within PCMs would be more reassuring to both course reps and students as sometimes feedback is not communicated verbally which means those segments of feedback do not get conveyed”

“More frequent opportunities for feedback forums / make the forums optional so that it becomes less of a chore for people and only people who have something specific to feedback actually go.”

To address the issues around transparency and accessibility the Students' Union has been in discussion with the University regarding a pilot of a comprehensive online feedback tool which would enable feedback to be collected digitally. This would allow for all students to access

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transparent feedback mechanisms and have confidence that they are being progressed in an appropriate, timely way.

2.3 Enrichment of the student experience (SE3)

We feel that the University provides substantial enrichment to the student experience through engagement in research, innovation, professional practice and employer engagement. The University offers a free two day personal and professional development programme for students that identify as women, Bounce! Women's Student Development. A range of speakers and interactive workshops cover topics such as; confidence and assertiveness, mindfulness and wellbeing, entrepreneurial skills and start-up support.

Bounce participant 2022

"Thank you so very much. I am an outwardly confident women but under the surface I am not. This has allowed me to see that I have so much more potential and that I have a voice- I needed a little push to see that so thank you, it means a lot. I also liked feeling comfortable to speak and share my experiences."

We know anecdotally that student's feedback positively about the benefits of taking a placement and how it has enriched their learning. Through our student led societies and sport club there is a culture of engagement with professional practices to develop their learning, this can be through academic external speakers to sports coaches.

2.4 Creating a Supportive Learning Environment (SE5)

From the start of the student journey, we believe that the University and UPSU provide a positive welcoming experience to the learning environment. Through positive partnership working between UPSU and the University we help students socialise and acclimatise through both academic and non-academic environments, which both ultimately enhance the student learning experience. In our UPSU Starting the Year Survey 2022 (516 UG respondents) 70% of respondents said that they felt a part of the University community, this has risen from 55% in 2020. UPSU and the University work collaboratively to provide social experiences both in the daytime and evenings to address isolation in the initial weeks of starting university. Through establishing key social events like fairs, activities and socials we have seen a decline in students saying that they struggled to meet people, from 37% in 2020 to 17% in 2022. Further developments in this area are being explored collaboratively by UPSU and the University in the University Internationalisation Committee, Welcome and Onboarding Group and Student Life Committee, who recognise there is a need to adapt our traditional offer to the diverse needs of our changing student body

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Student comments from UPSU Starting the Year Survey 2022

"I feel surrounded by the people on my course, it's easy to meet up with them. Staff are also not at a far distance and are always offering support. I like how many competitions and events there are, there's always something for everyone, making everyone feel included."

"Initially it was quite tricky to adjust living by myself but after a few days I began to get the hang of it. Making lots of friends and starting my course has made uni very enjoyable."

As a Students' Union we know that a key part of creating a supportive learning environment is through student communities. Through a sense of belonging and inclusion these communities contribute strongly to creating a supportive learning environment across the institution. Of our 117 societies (3,500 members) 45 are academically focussed and enable peer to peer learning and support.

We know that students can suffer from the pressures of studies and student life, 1 in 2 students (UPSU pulse survey 2022, 1,038 respondents) said that they struggled with mental health challenges. We believe there is good awareness of the services of support available to students. In our 2022 Starting the Year Survey 79% of respondents said that they are aware of the support available to them, which has risen by 10% in 2020. 81% of survey respondents in the same survey said that they felt that their wellbeing was considered by the University, increasing by 12% from 2020. There will always be areas for improvements in providing support for students and the University and UPSU work collaboratively to address these issues and explore solutions.

2.5 Physical and Virtual Learning Resources (SE6)

Our students generally have positive views of the physical spaces available to them on campus, this is evident through the UPSU pulse survey in 2020 (705 UG respondents) suggesting that 82% are satisfied with the study spaces on campus. Through the Universities Digital Strategies we have seen positive developments to support students learning. The developments that were made during Covid has showed the university's consideration to ensure its students are able to access resources and stay connected to progress their studies.

Student quote from UPSU Starting the Year survey 2022

"The University is really enjoyable as it provides a very student friendly atmosphere and there a lot of fun/ useful events that you can be a part of and also there are a lot of fun places inside the uni where you can catch up with your friends."

Student quote from UPSU Starting the Year survey 2020

"I understand the university is trying their best to give everyone the full experience so I appreciate the efforts. It's been great that the uni and staff have eased us in rather than chucking us in at the deep end. The staff have been supportive and answered our emails if we get worried especially when I worry about something I may not be up to speed with. They have uploaded stuff on time so I can get the work done and relive the material which is great. They have helped us meet people on the course too in a safe way."

2.6 Students as partners (SE7)

The University and Students' Union commitment to students is outlined in the Student Charter, tripartite agreement. Student-led initiatives that have resulted from this partnership include; stand up study space in the library, creation of the writing café, extended opening times of university buildings. The University, through elected representatives, have undertaken consultation on key strategic documents and policies such as the Access and Participation Plan 2020-21 – 2024-25, Extenuating Circumstances Policy and the Study and Wellbeing Policy.

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The UPSU Academic Representation system is based on the annual election of Course and School Representatives. Whilst training is provided by UPSU, support of the 600+ course reps and 13 School Reps is a collaborative endeavour by both the University and Students' Union. Representatives are engaged at programme, School and Faculty level, attending regular meetings with staff to present feedback, develop ideas and receive important information. Student representatives also attend University wide decision-making meetings such as Sustainability Advisory Group and Senate. Sabbatical Officers act as Faculty representatives and attend high level academic meetings alongside the VP Education.

The Sabbatical Officers attend Fitness to Practice and student misconduct panels to ensure fairness and give insight into the student perspective. We believe there are many positives of the impact of the student voice on learning and there are future opportunities to develop the feedback systems to enable greater student input and their understanding of their representation. This is reflected in our UPSU Pulse survey 2022 (1,038 UG respondents), 43% agreed that they felt they can influence change within their course, whilst 31% stated they were unsure of how the exact mechanisms of how they can influence change.

3. Student Outcomes

3.1 Student success beyond their studies (SO1)

We believe that the University provides students with comprehensive support to succeed and progress beyond their studies. Students present that they are very positive about their future career prospects, with 78% overall satisfied with this optional section in NSS 2022. 86% of students agreed that their career prospects had improved as a result of their course; 74% agreed that good advice was available for making career choices; and 73% agreed that good advice was available on further study opportunities. 63% of respondents to our UPSU 2020 pulse survey (618 UG responses) said that they were satisfied with the career services at the University.

Student representatives sit on the University Employability Advisory Group to ensure the student voice is present in key decisions supporting continuous improvement of the University's approach to careers and employability. We know anecdotally that through student involvement in students' union activities such as volunteering, societies, sports club and representation we enable students to develop skills to progress beyond university.