Liverpool Guild of Students

TEF Students Submission (January 2023)

1. We the Liverpool Guild of Students are a democratically led organisation made up of over 27,000 student members enrolled at the University of Liverpool. We are a registered charity and company limited by guarantee. Our mission is to offer excellent opportunities, services and facilities which improve, enrich and develop the lives of all students at the University of Liverpool.

2. Every year our members are given the opportunity to stand for and elect four Student Officers (President, Deputy President and two Vice-Presidents) who lead the organisation. Beyond this we also encourage our members to participate in our democratic structures through our 'Change It' procedure where students can submit ideas for changes they would like to see to improve their university experience, with more complex ideas sent for discussion at Guild Summit or may be put to a Preferendum for consideration by all students. Recent issues to be considered include whether the Guild should support the University and College Union (UCU) strike action and the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions Movement.

3. We are a recognised and representative channel of communication between students and the University of Liverpool. Our elected Student Officers play an important role in the University's governance processes, sitting on Council, Senate and a number of key groups and committees, including Education Committee. The officers also sit on Periodic Review Panels, Collaborative Annual Monitoring and Institutional Review events, as well as the University's Success Boards. This work is complemented by regular informal meetings with the Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Education and the Director of Student Administration and Support.

4. The institution's Student Success Framework, whose implementation is overseen by a series of Success Boards, has been welcomed by the Guild. A Guild Officer has had a seat on each of the Success Boards since they started. This framework and approach provides a clear vision and series of targets which can drive important change forward. The wide scope of the framework ensures that the University prioritises important aspects of the student experience, both directly related to learning, and beyond.

5. We regularly contribute to the development of University procedures both via the Student Officers' work and feedback provided by career staff, where they have relevant experience. For example, our Advice Service regularly support students with academic and disciplinary procedures. This has resulted in the Guild making an active contribution to seven changes to university policy, and the development of new policies in the last year. These are the non-academic misconduct; academic misconduct; fitness to study; Canvas; attendance monitoring polices; module selection process and the policy on recording and use of student names, gender identifiers and pronouns.

6. Students can volunteer to represent their cohort as a Course, School, Faculty or Senate Representative, with support from the University and the Student Voice Team within the Guild. The Student Voice Team is made up of three Faculty Student Voice Coordinators (FSVCs) who help to support Student Representatives in their role and coordinate representation activities within the relevant faculty. FSVCs provide Student Representatives with training and other resources relevant to their role and oversee their role activity for the academic year. For certain Student Representative positions, Undergraduate and Postgraduate Taught students are eligible to have their role activity recognised on their Higher Education Achievement Report (HEAR).

7. Student Representatives are able to engage with the University's quality assurance processes and feedback about the teaching and learning experiences on their course, by being members of committees at various levels. For example, Course Representatives attend Staff-Student Liaison Committees (SSLCs). In the Code of Practice on Student Representation, SSLCs describe "the department or school committee that provides a formal opportunity for Course Representatives to give evaluative comments to their department/school, and for students and staff to raise issues and comment on any concerns or changes related to their academic programmes and activities". School, Faculty and Senate Representatives use the experience and knowledge they have gained as a Course Representative to discuss matters affecting the teaching and learning experience and represent a wider cohort of students. School Representatives attend meetings such as Curriculum Board, Board of Studies, School Scrutiny Panel and School Education Committee. Faculty Representatives can attend Faculty Academic Quality and Standards Committee, Faculty Education Committee, Faculty Education Enhancement and Assurance Committee, and Faculty Recruitment, Admissions, and Widening Participation Committee. Lastly, Senate Representatives, one from each faculty, attend Senate alongside the four Student Officers.

8. Course Representatives are also able to engage in the quality assurance processes by undertaking an Enhancement Project. Enhancement Projects are academic-year-long research projects that focus on a particular issue or topic related to student experience. Supported by the school/department and the FSVCs in the Guild, Course Representatives must collect wider student feedback on their chosen topic and then recommend how the department, school, faculty or Guild (as appropriate) can improve or resolve the issue. In previous years, Course Representatives have completed Enhancement Projects on topics such as employability, departmental identity and sense of community, feedback mechanisms, non-academic student experience, assessment methods, and formula sheets. The completed projects are then fed back to the relevant department for consideration. One example of the impact of this can be seen in the Physics Department, who adopted to the recommendations as to how formula sheets should be formatted to inform best practice going forward.

9. The Student Voice Team conduct Student Forums with Course Representatives three times a year independently of the University. Forums are designed to be a safe space for Representatives to share feedback and student opinions with each other and their FSVCs without the input of University staff. The information gathered is then anonymised

and fed back to the University. This process allows us to receive feedback from students that they may otherwise not have felt comfortable or able to raise with University staff, giving us a clearer insight into student experience. Forums are normally themed around a specific topic, recent examples include 'the cost of living', academic support, and assessments.

10. We produce an annual Student Voice Report at the end of each academic year which summaries the main themes to emerge through our Student Voice work. This report is then fed back to relevant University staff and each of the three faculties who have engaged constructively with the feedback collected.

11. We also run termly meet ups and focus groups within the Guild to help us improve liberation, equality and inclusion of all student communities at the University. These sessions are currently targeted at the following groups of students: Students with a Disability, Women students, Black students, BAME (Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) students, LGBT+ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans) students, and Post-Graduate, Mature, and International students.

12. The activities and processes detailed above have given us a strong insight into students' opinions and experiences of their time at the University of Liverpool, which have informed the content of the remainder of this report.

13. The TEF period, being subject to both the Covid-19 pandemic and ongoing industrial action affecting the University, has been a very challenging time for the majority of students with significant impact on student experience reported across all three faculties. Many students experienced issues with social isolation, as well as difficulties with motivation and switching off from work presented by remote learning. However, overall, student feedback showed that students appreciated the effort that both teaching and support staff put in to developing high quality hybrid and wholly online teaching under difficult circumstances.

14. With the lifting of some Covid-19 restrictions from 2021/2022 onwards, the vast majority of students across the three faculties welcomed the return to in-person teaching on campus, finding sessions more engaging and workloads easier to balance. In October 2021, we conducted a survey to understand students' experiences of Hybrid Teaching. Over 4300 students responded to the survey of which 84% were undergraduates, 85% were 'Home Students' and 15% were International; 6% of respondents self-identified as disabled. Respondents also spanned all three faculties - Health and Life Sciences made up 35% of respondents, Science and Engineering made up 24% of respondents and Humanities and Social Sciences made up 41% of respondents. The results of this survey showed that 85% of the students who answered wanted 50% or more of their teaching face to face, with the overall mean for the amount of desired face to face teaching being 70%. These findings were then presented to the University's Leadership Forum resulting in the decision that at least 75% of teaching should be delivered in person from Spring in the 2021/2022 academic year.

15. Students made it clear that they wished to maintain some aspect of online learning going forward, with the ability to access recordings of lectures online being valued by students for allowing greater flexibility in their learning. The majority of students noted that the ability to refer back to earlier teaching was particularly helpful to aid their understanding of difficult concepts and revision. It has also allowed students with disabilities and chronic health conditions to not fall behind when their conditions have prevented attendance on campus on specific days. The quality of online resources does continue to vary with students reporting recycled material being used from previous years and issues with the Lecture Capture technology. A specific issue relates to how online material is presented, with clear transcripts or subtitles not always available which can affect the accessibility of the resources especially for disabled students.

16. The pandemic also saw the majority of assessments moved to online, with a wide range of assessment types reported across the three facilities, these included: essays, blogs, book reviews, reflective logs, presentations, podcasts, and take-home exams. As Covid-19 restrictions have been removed, a number of assessments have returned back to in-person exams. Feedback from Course Representatives shows that there is overwhelming support for online and/or open-book assessments, with students feeling these forms of assessment reduce anxiety and pressure around exams, while also providing a better test of knowledge. Concerns however remain among some students about the integrity of these forms of assessment and the increased potential for misconduct and cheating.

17. The University was quick to implement changes to their normal Code of Practice on Assessment throughout the pandemic to ensure that students' attainment was not unfairly impacted by changes to delivery required as a result of the restrictions in place. Following the initial lockdown in March 2020 the University brought in a 'safety net' procedure changing the way overall marks would be calculated that year, ensuring students were not unduly disadvantaged. Subsequent 'Assessment Support Packages' were then introduced in years 2020/2021 and 2021/2022 in response to the ongoing restrictions and student feedback. Measures introduced included the waiving of the evidence requirement for Extenuating Circumstances and an automatic five-day extension for coursework.

18. The University ensures that students are involved in the quality assurance process and facilitates various ways for students to feed into curriculum development and review. This can be through specific design workshops for new or modified programmes; in the student consultation as part of the Internal Periodic Review (IPR) process; sitting on SSLCs and curriculum boards; and by completing the end of module surveys. Overall, the feedback collected within SSLCs and periodic reviews reflects that students feel their curriculums help develop their skills and subject knowledge and that the intended learning outcomes are made clear and met.

19. We believe that the University's Liverpool Curriculum Framework (LCF) provides a solid framework to support staff with curriculum design and development going forward. This work is already in place, and we regularly hear of examples of innovative teaching

practices across the University, such as in Work, Organisation and Management where teaching incorporates podcasts, 'Ted Talks' and apps to appeal to a wide range of learning styles. It is important that all teaching staff in the University are enabled to meet the University's expectations set out in the LCF and so we welcome the work of the Centre for Innovation in Education in assisting staff to develop and review modules and share examples of good practice across the University.

20. The work the University has undertaken to embed employability skills into the curriculum across all three faculties has been positive and valued by students. In Chemistry, Year 3 students undertake a module co-delivered between academics and staff from the Careers & Employability team. Feedback through the IPR process shows that students found this very beneficial for developing employability skills and preparing for a variety of careers which are not solely Chemistry focussed. In Law, the Access to Justice and Social Welfare Law module requires students to undertake a six-week placement at a local 3rd sector agency, giving them a valuable opportunity to practice applying the law to real-life cases, and experiences that will benefit their future careers. While clinical courses are more professionally focused in their design, students in the Veterinary School have commended the department for how the curriculum encourages them to develop their knowledge and apply skills to a variety of species, allowing students to develop interests in specific sectors in the Veterinary profession.

21. Our Curriculum Mapping Volunteer scheme provides students with the opportunity to participate in auditing their course modules against criteria that includes the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as well as Methods of Learning and Wider Aspects from the Quality Assurance Agency's Education for Sustainable Development guidance. This project helps our understanding of the extent to which sustainability is embedded in students' learning while helping to identify best practice, areas for improvement and establish a baseline against which progress can be measured. The project provides students with the opportunity to take the lead on influencing change in their curriculum. The 2022 project had 331 modules mapped with SDG goal 9, 'Industry Innovation and Infrastructure', featuring as the most significantly integrated within the modules mapped. SDG goal 14, 'Life Below Water', was the least integrated into the modules audited. 73% of the modules audited contained some or significant problem-based learning which allowed students to work collaboratively on scenarios that could occur in real-world situations. Critical Thinking was the most well integrated Wider Aspect of Learning. Overall, students gave positive feedback about the scheme with the 2023 project now underway with the aim of higher student participation and an increase in the number of modules audited.

22. The size of classes has been raised by some students as an issue that can affect their learning, with students reporting that where seminars are delivered in larger groups it can be difficult for all students to have the opportunity to speak and to feel comfortable contributing in what should be interactive sessions. This issue predominantly seems to affect seminars within the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, with students reporting seminars of 20+ students which they felt was too many. Where seminars are delivered online, students appreciate being put into smaller break out rooms with the

lecturer taking it in turns to visit each group, as this was found to better facilitate discussion between students.

23. The issue of workload is a concern for students, with regular reports of 'deadline bunching' during key assessment periods in the year. Where this occurs, it causes significant stress as students report not having the opportunity to 'reset' between assessments which can detrimentally impact performance in subsequent assessments. There have also been issues of assessment overlapping, for example, where a 3-hour online exam will overlap with a 72-hour exam. The University have acknowledged these issues and are making efforts across subject areas to address this issue within the confines of the assessment calendar.

24. The return to campus has reaffirmed the positive impact of having the opportunity to work with other students and the benefits this can bring to learning. This has been particularly noted in courses with a practical element, for example lab work, as the Covid-19 restrictions have been lifted and students are better able to interact and work together. The ability to meet fellow students and staff in person has also had positive effects on student mental health and engagement.

25. While students clearly value the opportunity to work with their peers there are consistent concerns regarding assessed group work, especially where students feel they have unfairly lost out due to the lack of engagement of other members in their group for which they have little control. There are also concerns regarding how students' 'unconscious bias' can influence their perception of group members' ability and contribution, and can affect a student's experience of group work. There are examples of attempts across the University to try and address this issue such as in the School of Life Sciences who have introduced a 'buddy check' system integrated into Canvas that allows students to provide peer evaluation for group work. Many students would welcome this system being adopted more widely. Care should, however, be taken as feedback from students on courses where this is already used suggests there is a perception that the tool may be used to unfairly penalise peers for irrelevant reasons. This suggests that there are underlying challenges relating to group work that will not be entirely resolved by technical solutions.

26. Throughout the TEF period, assessment feedback is an issue that has consistently arisen within our Student Voice work as an area students would like to see improvement. This was also reflected in the University's 2022 NSS data. A regular issue highlighted is that it can take a long time for feedback to be received, often well beyond the three-week expectation set out in the University's Code of Practice on Assessment (Appendix N). This can result in feedback being received too close to the next assessment deadline for students to be able to incorporate the feedback into their next assignment. This is a particular concern where modules have a formative assessment prior to the summative assessment as this can defeat the object and effectiveness of undertaking a formative assessment.

27. There are also inconsistencies reported with the feedback that students receive across all three faculties. Common issues relate to the quantity and usefulness of the feedback received; uncertainty over how feedback relates to the marking criteria; and variations across departments and modules depending on the staff member who has marked the work. Given these issues, we are encouraged that the University is focussing on improving the assessment and feedback processes as part of their NSS action plan. However, there still remain challenges in this area especially with increased student numbers on some courses and ongoing industrial action.

28. The feedback received from students with a disability indicates that despite work by the University, there remain issues with the accessibility of campus and learning resources. Specific examples we have received relate to not all rooms on campus being accessible to students with mobility issues and the availability of captions and transcripts for online lectures. There have also been reports that students have had difficulties accessing the 'reasonable adjustments' they require, either because the adjustments provided haven't been sufficient or because they have felt judged for asking for the support for which they are entitled. These issues feed into a sense amongst some students with a disability of 'ableism' across the University, within both the staff and student population. The introduction of peer Disability Coaches within the Disability Service should help address some of these issues and further empower students with disabilities to access the support for which they are entitled.

29. The University has made improving the accessibility of campus a priority, which we welcome. Effort, however, needs to be made to ensure that disabled students and staff are involved at all stages of this process, to ensure that any proposals meet the specific needs of students and don't appear 'performative'. Specific feedback we have gathered shows that the introduction of dedicated 'quiet spaces' across campus would be a resource welcomed by students with neurodiverse and mental health conditions to improve their experiences on campus. It is encouraging to see the University's commitment to this project after a successful trial within the Guild.

30. It is encouraging that in the 2021/2022 academic year students with a disability achieved higher attainment levels than students without a registered disability, with 88.8% of students with disabilities obtaining a Class I or II:1 degree, which was 2.8% higher than the institutional profile. This improvement has corresponded with changes to the way many assessments have been conducted, brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic. While this may not be the main contributing factor for the improved attainment, many students with a disability feel the new assessment methods have been beneficial in providing a fairer opportunity to show their academic ability. It is therefore important that this is considered when deciding the format of future assessments.

31. The University has a number of mechanisms in place to support students to succeed in their studies. In terms of academic support, the Academic Adviser system is one of the key support relationships, with each student being assigned to a member of academic staff in their department. Students report that it can feel like an 'adviser lottery' in terms of the quality of support received varying between advisers, with some being very helpful

and others less proactive. Students speak positively about their support when contact is regular and scheduled sessions have a structure setting out clear expectations for both staff and students. On the whole, students on smaller courses, such as Music, reported more positive experiences and relationships with academic staff.

32. As part of the Student Forums we undertook in 2021/2022, we asked Course Representatives for student feedback on the University's library resources. The feedback we received was very positive with students particularly praising the facilities available, such as study spaces and the increased number of texts available to access online. The integrating of reading lists via the 'Reading Lists @ Liverpool' tab and the 'Get It For Me' services were also praised. Students commended library staff for the valuable service they provide, finding them very helpful, particularly at troubleshooting problems with accessing different articles and texts.

33. The library's KnowHow system, that provides a range of workshops, webinars and online tutorials to help improve academic skills, was particularly valued by students who had accessed the system. This is in line with the University's own feedback which shows that the vast majority of students who used the system found that it had helped improve their academic skills and would recommend it to other students. The Student Forums showed that there is a clear appetite for additional academic support with students pointing out that they sometimes lacked confidence in their academic and study skills. While embedding these skills throughout the curriculum will benefit all students, there may also be scope to publicise the KnowHow services more widely as our feedback showed that not all students are aware of these services and their benefits.

34. The University's Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), Canvas, has received positive feedback with students seeing it as a big improvement on the previous system Vital. Students have reported that the system is modern, easy to use and accessible. There have been some issues raised about the lack of consistency in how different modules are arranged on Canvas, with four Enhancement Projects in the Faculty of Science and Engineering exploring student's experiences of using Canvas in 2021/2022. These reports recommended that schools adopt a more standardised layout and content requirement across all modules. We are pleased that the University have introduced subject area action plans to improve the quality of Canvas sites and share good practice, which should further improve this resource for students.

35. Mental health remains a key concern for many students at the University, with it frequently being reported as an issue that has a detrimental impact on student experience. There are many contributing factors for this including the Covid-19 pandemic, isolation and current Cost of Living crisis, with 83% of participants in our recent Cost of Living survey stating this was having an impact on their mental health. Students also raised how they feel that aspects of their course can impact on their mental health with deadline bunching and heavy workloads cited as examples. This in turn can impact student experience and outcomes on the course. Course Representatives have fed back that where a course provides a reading week during the semester, students have found these beneficial as it provides them with the opportunity

to consolidate their learning, while also providing a break from the intensity of their course. Consequently, many students have noted the benefits to their mental health.

36. Where a student is experiencing unexpected health issues, the University does have policies in place such as the Extenuating Circumstances and Exemptions from Late Penalties. The requirement to provide independent medical evidence to support a claim can be a barrier preventing students accessing these forms of mitigation. Through our Advice Service casework, we are aware that this type of evidence can be particularly difficult to obtain for mental health issues, especially for new conditions. The ability therefore to request some form of mitigation on a 'self-certification' basis would be widely welcomed by students and bring the University in line with other universities across the sector.

37. The University provides a wide range of support to students experiencing mental health issues through the Wellbeing Team and Counselling service, which many students have found beneficial. The University has extended the support provision in response to student need, however, concerns persist about how long it can take to access these services, especially the more specialist support such as counselling. There remains a strong feeling amongst students that the University should be doing more to support students experiencing mental health issues. Consideration also needs to be made as to the diversity of staffing teams in these services to ensure they are meeting the needs of all students at the University.

38. Each year we recognise the outstanding contributions made by Student Representatives and University staff to the student experience through our Guild Awards. The awards provide students with the opportunity to nominate societies or individuals who embody the Guild's values and have gone above and beyond to support students. Last year, awards were presented to three members of University staff who had shown inclusive and innovative teaching practices and provided invaluable support during the Covid-19 pandemic.

39. This submission has been produced by the Guild President with assistance from staff at the Guild. We can confirm that the University has not tried to influence the content of our submission. The evidence used to produce this report has come from pre-existing data we gathered from the sources outlined within this report. We believe this data, alongside the wider work we undertake with our members, means we are best placed to provide a representative account of the student experiences across the University of Liverpool community. In producing this submission, we have reflected on the potential for students to focus on areas of the University that they feel require improvement, rather than areas they are satisfied with given the nature of our role. Care has therefore been taken to ensure that we have provided as fair and balanced account of the University of Liverpool student experience as possible.

40. Overall, we feel the University have demonstrated an understanding of the challenges they are facing, and a willingness to engage with student feedback to improve student

experience and outcomes at the University. Good progress is being made and we look forward to continuing our strong working partnership with the University going forward.

Submitted by Vasiliki Samuels, President, on behalf of Liverpool Guild of Students