

Introduction

The University of York Students' Union (YUSU) is the representative body for students at the University of York. Just under 60 years old, YUSU incorporates a charity and a subsidiary trading arm together, providing a range of services and activities designed to improve students' lives, create student employment opportunities, and support students to make the most of their time at York. YUSU has a well-established representation network in place that sees the Union recruit, elect and train around 500 students each year to represent student voice at all different levels of the University. This ranges from course, department and faculty level, to key University committees and decision-making bodies encompassing Course, Department and Faculty Reps, liberation-based Part-Time Officers and the full-time Academic Officer. The approach effectively embeds student voice into both the day to day lives of students and governance at all levels of the University of York; providing opportunities for students to work collaboratively at different levels of responsibility. While on the whole, this creates a systematic approach to representation, it has also provided a rich source of existing information to support and inform this submission.

The submission has been written independently by YUSU; it has not been influenced by the institution. The University has, however, created a positive working relationship throughout this process, for example, by sharing data sources. Student representatives have been involved at every stage of writing the institution's submission, sitting on working groups and providing feedback at the draft stage. Similarly, YUSU has shared a draft student submission with the University. This submission has been written with student feedback at its heart, drawing on what it feels like to be studying at York and providing examples of where students were able to use their expertise in their experience to co-create projects that have had a meaningful impact on the student experience at York. This submission was also written as an extension of the institution submission rather than duplication, with that in mind, there are some areas not covered by this submission as the institution submission has already accurately reflected the student view.

Evidence from Student Representatives

Last year 304 UG Course, Department and Faculty Reps were elected or recruited to represent student views across campus. These students have a direct impact on the quality and delivery of the courses provided by the University as members of a range of academic governance meetings such as Board of Studies, Departmental Teaching Committees and Student Staff forums. The feedback they collect from peers is presented at these meetings with each committee having standing agenda items specifically for reps. Course Reps also pass feedback to their Academic Officer to ensure best practice is shared across the institution and innovative approaches to student voice within departments are shared and considered or implemented across the institution more widely. Staff Student Forum minutes are also shared with the Union to help ensure consistency of operations across the University. Department and Faculty Reps provide a handover document to the incoming Rep each year explaining what achievements have been made, key collaborations with the department and where they have struggled to make an impact. They also meet fortnightly as a group to identify areas of best practice across the University.

One of the key strategic projects in the University's Access and Participation Plan was the creation of a Student Expert Panel offering advice and challenge as a means to strengthen the institution's commitment to moving from a culture of consultation through to partnership, and developing a more systematic approach to listening to student stories. The Student Expert Panel was consulted to ensure this submission was reflective of the diverse student body at York.

Evidence from Student-led Awards

YUSU's annual student-led teaching awards, the Excellence Awards, present an opportunity for students to celebrate staff members from across the University, who consistently stand out as having a major impact on their academic experience, learning and development; the content of the nominations provides space for students to meaningfully reflect on their experience at the University. From 2019 onwards YUSU has received in the region of 400 nominations for the awards annually, highlighting the value that students place on having the opportunity to thank staff outside of the classroom for their work. A student panel shortlist and decides a winner for each of the categories which look at delivering quality, enthusiastic teaching, bringing fresh perspectives to module content and encouraging the accurate representation of diverse backgrounds and experiences within academia. For YUSU, the Awards are an example of how we use a breadth of academic representation across disciplines to identify and share best practice.

Student Union Policy and Research

YUSUggestions operates as a central, online hub, from which students can share their ideas for policy change on the Union's website. The platform has voting and commenting functionality which has served to widen student engagement with the policy process. In 2021/2022 338 unique students voted on ideas and a total of 559 votes were cast. Policies are then debated in the Ideas Forum; a student-led policy Forum made up of representatives of all different facets of student life at the University. Where relevant, policy proposals have been used to inform this submission, such as the creation of a safety net policy.

The Your Say Survey was conducted over the third term of the academic year 2021/22. The purpose of the survey was to gather student opinions on various aspects of YUSU. A total of 1,015 students responded to the survey. This insight has been used to showcase priority areas where students feel the Union needs to work more closely with the University. Female students were over-represented in the responses with over a third of the survey respondents identifying as a woman (67%), approximately a quarter identifying as male (24%) and 4% as Non-binary. Eighteen (1.77%) participants opted for 'Prefer not to say'. Seven (0.69%) respondents 'preferred to self-describe'. 142 responses were received from disabled students (13.99%).

The First Impressions Survey goes out to all first-year undergraduate students. It asks a range of both qualitative and quantitative questions relating to the transition to University and including the student academic experience within the first few weeks of term. 1,285 students completed the survey in the 2021/22 academic year and 1,466 completed it in the 2020/21 year; responses have been used to clarify why students chose to study at York and if the

course they are studying matches their expectations. 65% of respondents were female, again an overrepresentation of the demographic of the university; 68% of respondents were home students; 26% of respondents were international and 4% were from the EU. 14% of respondents were disabled. 29% considered themselves to be from a working-class background and 29% identified as BAME.

The data gathered demonstrates the diverse range of voices we have at the University. Students were forthcoming in sharing their experiences of where the University demonstrated excellence for all, but also where work had begun but there was still room for improvement.

Academic Experience and Assessment

The wide range of teaching and assessment approaches offered at the university enables students to thrive regardless of their background and learning styles. In Theatre, Film and Television, for example, students are able to take part in a group production in a range of roles from acting, script writing, and set or costume design. This allows students to tailor their assessment, pick how they can best contribute to the production and demonstrate their skill set most effectively. Students speak incredibly highly of this module commenting that 'Something [we] particularly enjoyed about this module was the freedom to put yourself forward for whatever role you wanted, regardless of experience. Across the module, you have had the opportunity to explore so many avenues of theatre, from theory to production, to practical...and it reminded us why we chose this course in particular.

A module in the Philosophy department enables group members to engage in discursive learning whilst working towards producing a podcast of accessible and philosophical debate. When asked, students said that during this module they were always made to feel as though their thoughts really mattered.

Students need no prior knowledge of technology to succeed and are given training on specialist materials, a unique skill to add to their CV. This module also exemplifies the ways in which the University has moved away from traditional written assessment methods in some areas, supporting students to articulate complex ideas innovatively.

Examples from our Student Expert Panel discussing assessment practices which are tailored included one student commenting for their final year Chemistry UG research piece, they were able to craft something entirely around the field of study they are planning on pursuing in a PhD.

This willingness of staff to allow students to have the freedom to pursue their own interests in their subjects is felt strongly across the institution. Final-year projects often allows students to demonstrate and develop their expertise in a subject area and are heralded as the most rewarding part of their studies. The support students receive with these projects is appreciated with one student commenting their supervisor had "provided outstanding, in-depth guidance, with perfect clarity to ensure that I consistently

had a sufficient springboard to progress with my dissertation and succeed in my undergraduate studies” in their Excellence Awards nomination. Areas, where the University does not perform so strongly, include the Computer Science department which is below the sector benchmark in OfS data. Student representatives have commented that this may be due to inconsistency across the department

The University’s NSS results repeatedly indicate that a key strength of the student experience at York is that staff deliver subject content that pushes students and encourages them to engage with complex topics. NSS Q3 *The course is intellectually stimulating and* repeatedly scores 4% higher than the sector mean, while on NSS Q5: *The course provides opportunities to explore concepts in depth*, York scored between 2.62 and 3.38 percentage points higher than the sector mean in 2021/2022. Staff share their enthusiasm for their subject with students, creating an atmosphere which focuses on a love of learning and exploring new ideas. We know from our First Impressions survey that 62% of first-year students chose to study at York because of its reputation for high-quality teaching, but we also know that 65% also chose York because they believed it would be the best institution to help them broaden their horizons and help them grow in their field of study. As the NSS data demonstrates, this expectation is realised once students begin their studies.

We also know that innovative delivery of course content is something that our students look for when discussing excellence. The NSS Q2 - *Staff have made the subject interesting* - had a score in 2022 of 82.63% agree vs a sector mean of 78.02% - scores for this question have been at least 3.5 pp above the sector mean since 2019. This is also highlighted from a deep dive into our Excellence Award’s ‘Most Inspiring’ category which typically receives over 100 nominations. Students nominate staff for their ‘ability to make explicit links to real-world applications of the learning’, ‘[using] current affairs, which helped develop knowledge base’ and ‘delivering lectures with clear enthusiasm’ (Excellence Awards criteria). An example in the History department sees students tour landmarks in the city centre to help them understand their historical importance in context.

Similarly, Kings Manor is an asset to students with every Archaeology Course Rep at Student Staff forums feeling that ‘to arrive at class inside a Grade 1 listed historic building really felt amazing because I was living and breathing what I was studying... archaeology is everywhere you turn’ (Archaeology Student Staff Forum participants). This use of real-world content, brought to life by academics and combined with engaging delivery is something that students feel is an asset of the University in the Arts & Humanities.

Supportive Learning Environments

Overall the University has created a learning environment where the majority of students feel like they have easy access to support when they need it. Every student has a supervisor in their department, supporting their academic development and providing pastoral support

where needed. This assessment of the learning environment is further evidenced by student responses to specific NSS questions: in 2022 for Question 12 - *I have been able to contact staff when I needed to* - York students responded with an 87.4% agreement score (7.15% above the sector mean), for Question 13 - *I have received sufficient advice and guidance in relation to my course* - our students' agreement placed us 2% above the sector mean, and for Question 14 - *Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices* - 69.98% agreed. These scores place York top overall and for every question in the 'Academic Support' dimension of the NSS in relation to the Russell Group. The OfS data also shows that overall, York is above the sector benchmark for Academic Support.

The University also provides a learning environment where students feel supported by their peers as well as staff. NSS Question B6_1 *'I have had plenty of opportunities to interact socially with other students'* was 82.3% agree, +3.79 above the sector mean in 2019 and 80.72% agree, +2.26 above the mean, in 2020. The University offers several Peer Assisted Learning (PAL) schemes. Whilst these were developed pre-COVID-19, they became a creative way to create learning communities during the pandemic when in-person learning was restricted. The schemes see students design their own learning from reviewing module content to developing skills supported by experienced staff. The schemes create an environment where students can try out ideas, gain confidence in asking questions and deepen their understanding by working with their peers. The Intercultural PAL scheme also allows native speakers to be paired with Languages for All students to enhance their understanding of a new language and culture. The PAL schemes are well received by students and have continued to grow post-pandemic demonstrating that students welcome the formalised opportunities to meet with others and make friends 'First year is the time to ask questions, and the PAL sessions are the perfect place to do so. Throughout my first year, the PAL sessions were a great place for me to seek guidance and reassurance regarding any concerns or queries I had about all aspects of university life and now I want to do the same for other students' (PAL Leader). Results for additional NSS Question B6_2 - *I am satisfied with the range of clubs and societies on offer* - was 85.3% agree in 2020, +12.56 pp above the sector mean. The same result for 2019 was 86.8% agree (+13.6 pp above the mean). In 2021/2022 3,875 students became members of a course-based society and 3,176 became members in 2022/2023. The large number of students joining societies which complement their learning allows them to engage socially with like-minded students and discuss academic content outside of the classroom. A number of students reference that joining academic societies has been a highlight during their time at the University as it has allowed them to develop their interests in their subject material and feel part of an academic community in which they can thrive (NSS open comments & YUSU research).

In 2021/2022 526 students became members of Union-led librarianship networks meaning they were able to engage with students with similar lived experiences, further contributing to a supportive learning environment whilst at York. International students have commented that the support they have received from the University has helped them ease into a new type of learning they might not have experienced in their home countries. Departments frequently offer additional modules which provide students with the basic knowledge that may not have been covered in their previous education but will help them thrive alongside their UK peers. The University also offers a large range of MOOCs to help those without prerequisite

knowledge catch up before they begin their modules.

The YUSU Advice & Support Centre (ASC) typically deals with in the region of 500+ cases each academic year; a total of 583 new cases were seen in the 2021-22 academic year (October 2021 to September 2022) in addition to providing independent advice and guidance on a wide range of academic progress, University policies, and personal and wellbeing issues. During the COVID-19 period, slight declines in monthly case numbers were seen. This could be attributed to students feeling more informed about where they could seek support before they need to access advice services. There is also a sense that the University's changes to procedures as a result of COVID-19 (such as the temporary removal of evidentiary requirements for exceptional circumstances claims and the introduction of self-certification for short-term illnesses or other circumstances) meant that the number of students that needed to use ASC decreased a little at this time. However, since the resumption of in-person teaching and the reinstatement of previous policies - specifically evidentiary requirements for exceptional circumstances and appeals - there have been spikes in case volumes in 2021-22, in particular with regard to students seeking to challenge academic results or progression decisions in the summer assessment period.

Furthermore, the volume of academic misconduct cases has increased considerably over the past few years. A notable increase in such cases that coincided with the introduction of online assessments has continued and increased further as most departments have maintained these methods of assessments, such as open exams, for which there seems to be greater scope for breaches of assessment rules as well as lack of clarity about those rules. Similarly, there has been a noticeable increase in academic appeals across the University in the past couple of years, the majority of which are submitted on the grounds of 'exceptional circumstances'. While volumes of both academic misconduct and appeals cases have increased during this time across the whole student population, there has been a marked increase in cases involving international students. This perhaps highlights the need to improve induction and support for new students arriving at York and familiarising themselves with new academic and support structures. More generally, it has been evident that the increase in appeals, complaints and academic misconduct case levels has put significant pressure on the University departments that are processing those cases. As a result, many students have experienced significant delays and uncertainty while they await updates or outcomes for these processes. Recent improvements and changes at the University aimed at increasing capacity in relation to appeals and complaints will hopefully result in improvements to processes and adherence to expected timescales but this is likely to be a continuing issue throughout the current academic year.

In September 2021, the University approved the implementation of self-certification in relation to assessments. This was in order to address the significant increase in exceptional circumstances claims as a result of the pandemic and was also in line with the approach

Self-certification was an

adjustment from the policy in the previous academic year, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, in which any exceptional circumstances claim could be made without evidence.

As an adjustment from that policy unlimited uses of short-term (4-day), self-certification were put in place. At the time of doing so, the University decided not to limit the number of uses of self-certification out of concern about the ongoing impacts of the pandemic. Students saw this as a real benefit to their studies. Despite opposition to the limitation of the policy from student Reps, Part-Time Officers and Sabbatical Officers from both YUSU and the Graduate Students' Association, the University decided to reduce the number of self-certification opportunities that students could utilise in one academic year from 2022/2023 onwards. The Sabbatical Officers invited all student leaders to respond on the issue after consulting with the students they represented. 93% of those student leaders (523) commented that they felt there should be no limit to the number of times they could self-certify and that this would significantly contribute to a supportive learning environment post-COVID-19. Significant concerns were raised by some individuals that this would disproportionately impact those who are awaiting diagnosis for chronic conditions and therefore not eligible for Student Support Plans which enable them more guaranteed extensions.

Facilities

The University aims to provide physical and virtual learning resources which contribute to outstanding teaching and learning. Overall, 2022 scores for the Learning Resources dimension of NSS were 85.4, which is 3rd in the Russell Group. The NSS Q19 - *"The library resources (e.g. books, online services and learning spaces) have supported my learning well"* were 2.8pp above the sector mean in 2022 at 86.1% agree; and 4.7 pp above the sector mean at 80.2% agree in 2021 - the most affected by the pandemic. The 2022 result was 4th in the Russell Group. The departmental-specific study spaces in Mathematics, English and Politics were delivered in response to student feedback requesting more tailored spaces for students to come together outside of scheduled teaching to learn. Students have commented this adds to a sense of community and belonging to their departments (NSS open comments & Student-Staff Forum minutes).

Across the University there are also spaces which provide high-quality learning environments for students on specialist courses. Arts students have the opportunity to work in spaces which mimic professional theatres across the country and use industry-level equipment in production suites. Students on science-based degrees have access to high-quality labs and often have full teaching days scheduled in these spaces each week which is above the sector average. The Law School has an interactive law firm which embeds pedagogical and physical role-play and experiential learning year-round for students. The English Department also has the Thin Ice Press, an in-house printing workshop comprising two historical printing presses dating back to the 18th century. Students have the chance to operate the presses to learn about the history of books they're

The NSS scores for Q.22 *I have been able to access to course-specific resources* - was 87% agree in 2022 (+4.52pp above the sector mean). The result for 2021 - affected by the pandemic - was 79.8% agree, which was 6.07+pp above the sector mean. This was 5th in the Russell Group in 2022 suggesting these tailored spaces are appreciated.

Where possible, all lectures are captured to ensure material is accessible to all students. This development has happened over a number of years partly in response to the lobbying from YUSU Academic Officers and their consecutive manifestos. The University accelerated its lecture capture provisions during the pandemic and increased its support by providing corrected captions for all of its recorded content going above and beyond OfS guidance and surpassing many of its sector equivalents. This was deeply appreciated by students as it meant that the University was able to mitigate potential barriers during an already difficult period. NSS question Q18 *'The IT resources and facilities provided have supported my learning well'* had a result of 83.16% agreeing in 2022 (+5.92% over the sector mean). This placed York 2nd in the Russell Group. Results for this question for NSS 2021 - the most affected by the pandemic - were 77.2% agree (5.3pp above the sector mean), which would seem to suggest the move to online learning went comparatively well.

Student Engagement and Collaboration

Overall the University continually seeks opportunities to engage with students as partners to enhance their experiences. Outcomes such as the formation of the Student Expert Panel are a positive reflection of the approach, as is the University senior leadership team's regular (fortnightly) attendance at the Academic Leadership Team (comprising Course, Department and Faculty Reps) meetings to discuss specific issues. This collaborative approach has laid the foundation, on balance, of a positive culture of co-production in which students have opportunities to take active roles and are jointly involved in decision-making to improve outcomes and ensure a positive student experience. This has been particularly evident during challenging times. Throughout periods of industrial action, for example, the Union captured the experiences of students at a modular level which could be escalated to the University. Members of the University's senior leadership and student representatives met regularly to discuss these subject-level issues and create action plans to ensure the impact on students was kept to a minimum and any issues students experienced were mitigated. Solutions were put in place which would be most impactful for students on particular courses, instead of a blanket policy. Examples of this include: reimbursing students who paid for childcare places which were no longer needed; reimbursing students in the English Department who had bought specific books that would no longer be studied; and rescheduling excursions in Archaeology and Environmental studies so students could still experience fieldwork essential to their degree. A further example was York's quick response to a request for a 'safety net' approach to academic attainment in the early stages of the pandemic. students submitted YUSU suggestion policy proposals to lobby the university to put mechanisms in place to prevent students from being disadvantaged by industrial action. The Sabbatical Officers raised these student proposals and together developed a policy which ensured 'no detriment' to undergraduate students, as long as a pass mark was achieved. The model provided a guarantee in advance for students of their lowest final academic year average, taking account of the extraordinary conditions students were facing. This policy was one of the first to be developed in response to students' needs during the pandemic and York was the only Russell Group institution to provide such support.

An academic contingency group of University and Union staff as well as sabbatical officers

was established in response to the COVID-19 lockdown and changes to teaching and assessment. A series of measures were developed in response to the situation including, in particular: from March 2020 1st-year undergraduate students did not have to take summative assessments to progress; changes to Leave of Absence processes; removing evidentiary requirements and making them easier to navigate; dedicated COVID-19 University webpages. Provisions were also made to the University's exceptional circumstances policy including for students unable to access suitable equipment or reliable wifi to support online study and assessments. Many of these policy changes were introduced following consultation with the Union through contingency groups.

On a departmental level, there are compelling examples of positive and innovative practices too. For example, again during the COVID-19 period, YUSU collaborated with the Computer Science Department to establish a student-led Buddying Scheme for the start of the 2020-21 academic year. The programme was designed to support undergraduates to settle into the department and transition to student life during a period where teaching was online and Student Reps had identified incoming students may well feel alienated. The response to the scheme was positive with forty-five second and third-year students volunteering to buddy seventy-first years. 50% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the scheme has positively contributed to their personal development in evaluation.

Whilst the University at the most senior levels is positive about engagement with students, and on the whole, expects co-production to be the standard approach, there are however cases where individual staff put barriers in place to stop students from having meaningful engagement which could impact their experience. Most notably in the electronic engineering department where Student Staff forums meetings are run by a staff member as opposed to a student Rep as is the case in most other departments. This results in a meeting that pertains to student issues being lacking in discussion, with only small amounts of time allocated to each rep at the end of the meeting. This staff-led format suppresses student voice, as staff outnumber students who are often dismissive and defensive about student-led ideas to improve course content and structure. The OfS continuation data for the department is significantly below the sector benchmark and the NSS Q.25 score is significantly below the sector mean at 42.17% (-8.97 below the sector). Whilst there may be surface-level opportunities to feedback, the University has some way to go in explaining to students what value they place on and what results come from the feedback they receive from students at meetings like SSF.

Student Outcomes

The majority of students have the opportunity to undertake a placement (often paid) in an industry of their choice for up to 12 months as part of their degree programme, demonstrating a commitment to giving students the best opportunity to succeed after university. This is supplemented by a written assessment encouraging student reflection on the experience and the skills gained; supporting those students to better articulate their skills to future employers. The University further supports this through its internship bureau which provides short-term paid roles for students with businesses across the region. Student Support Plans often outline the broad accommodations that employers may be able to offer students with disabilities and the careers team often help students reflect on what working

environments would be best suited for their needs so students feel confident in their abilities to have further conversations about their needs at work. The disability services provided by the university are still accessible to students on placements to support but also offer a smooth transition back into study.

The York Strengths programme furthers the university's ethos of self-reflection by helping first-year students to identify their most employable characteristics in line with what employers are looking for. This proactive approach to helping students understand where their skills lie is appreciated by students, with many often commenting that they did not feel as much stress about finding employment in their final year as discussing their values and skills was embedded so early in their degree programme. Those who submitted nominations for the 'Championing Careers' category, compliment how staff will often go above and beyond to give tailored advice to students when they're seeking careers and often attribute their careers because of the staff they interacted with during their degree. Anecdotally, international students have reported that international students feel that the York Strengths programme and other personal development pathways are UK-centric, and not adapted well for those who are wanting professional progression overseas. Whilst this isn't recorded in a data-driven way, we have yet to see any developments in the York Strengths programme that would suggest that international students are given the space needed to thrive in these programmes.

The University also offers a wider range of employment opportunities to students, allowing them the freedom to work around their studies and gain paid work experience. The student ambassador scheme lets students discuss their lived experiences of being a student in their department and showcase the university, the Departmental Community Coordinator role sees students working in collaboration with departments to build a sense of belonging, and a number of departments employ student partners for short-term project work. These opportunities provide safe spaces for students to support themselves during their studies and leave behind a legacy for future students.

Conclusion

As outlined in this submission there are areas where the University excels and has put an inclusive student experience at its heart, mitigating barriers and supporting students to thrive. There are also areas where encouraging improvements are being made and where more needs to be done. We think York benefits from a strong partnership between the institution and its students, facilitated by the Students' Union, but we are aware of the challenge of protecting an authentic independent student narrative that steers our collaborative work. Overall we believe this to be an accurate representation of students' views and where the University can demonstrate that it has provided excellence for all students.