TEF 2023: STUDENT WRITTEN SUBMISSION

University of Essex Online (Kaplan Open Learning)

Foreword:

"When I joined the Student Council for the first time three years ago, it was a new initiative with grand ambitions and expectations but few resources available to effectively facilitate change concerning salient topics affecting University of Essex Online (UoEO) students' learning experience.

However, solid progress was made thanks to the resilience and commitment of the Student Experience Team, the Student Experience Committee, and the learners that joined the Student Council throughout the years. The initiative gradually established a synergy between staff members and students, which translated into tangible improvements for the broader learner population.

When the Student Council started, creating a document such as the Student Written Submission was nearly impossible. Today, however, we came together as a team and relentlessly worked to complete this report, despite the distance, the time difference, and the multiple work, academic, and personal commitments that keep us busy.

I couldn't be prouder of representing University of Essex Online students, particularly the remarkable group of motivated and dedicated individuals who are part of the Student Council. I am beyond grateful to them, the Student Experience Team, and the Student Experience Committee for their collaboration and support in bringing this document to life!"

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CONTRIBUTORS:

This report was written in December 2022

SECTION 1: APPROACH TO EVIDENCE-GATHERING

Our approach to evidence gathering considered both the necessity of producing updated information on student experience and outcomes and compiling a comprehensive report despite the time constraints. Hence, alongside existing evidence from different surveys (End of Module survey, Graduate Outcomes survey, UoEO Student Outcomes survey, etc.) provided by the Student Experience Committee, new data was produced precisely to redact the present document.

Specifically, we designed a 22-item survey with 5-to-6-point Likert scale and open questions covering various aspects of the student experience. It was promoted through two videos shared via email that briefed students on the purpose of the survey and encouraged them to complete it within the deadline. Such a methodology ensured we had a sufficient but manageable amount of data to work with and allowed us to reach a broad student population in a short time frame. The results of the 309 respondents across all courses were collected and summarised in an Excel spreadsheet so they could be easily accessed by the Student Council members responsible for writing the SWS.

Since most of the evidence concerning student outcomes came from a 2019 survey comprising alums only, we decided to run a virtual focus group with   students from various courses to integrate those data. The new information focused on the perspective of current students on the expected outcomes. Participants were recruited via email and signed an Informed Consent form before the session. The   Student Experience staff remained available for assistance and debriefing afterwards. During the focus group, one of the Student Experience officers assisted in taking notes, and they were subsequently made available to the Student Council members responsible for writing the SWS.

SECTION 2: STUDENT EXPERIENCE

Student experience comprises different aspects of learners' higher-education journey, varying across institutions.

As an online learning service provider, UoEO has to put great emphasis on the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) and creating stimulating and engaging conditions for students across 120 countries, despite the difficulties of delivering the curriculum and services entirely online.

The latest survey revealed the university is doing a great job in providing high-grade education to all students, as 89% of the respondents reported being satisfied with the overall quality of their course. However, the next section will break down the different aspects of the UoEO student experience, revealing what is going strong and what, on the other hand, can be improved.

Application and Enrolment

Perspective students can apply to their course of preference through the UoEO website or by contacting the Admissions Advisers via phone or email. Besides personal details, applicants are required to provide some supporting documents that can be pre-assessed by the Admissions Advisers free of charge and commitment.

UoEO believes in accessible education, so it minimises the entry requirements to allow as many people as possible to access higher education. However, as the courses are delivered in English, students are required to provide evidence of their understanding of the language. For those who do not hold a certification or other formal proof, the university offers a free English assessment test at the beginning of their course.

Additionally, thanks to the Student Ambassador Programme, UoEO allows prospective students to contact learners already enrolled with the institution on Unibuddy to gain insights on their current experience and other relevant information.

The latest survey did not reveal particular issues with the application and enrolment process, but some comments have been put forward on the same line as the one below:

"It was difficult for me at first, but [...] now I am grateful to be a student."

Although the university is doing its best to make the process as straightforward as possible for everybody, lacking in-person interaction can feel uncertain or confusing for some people. However, passed the initial steps, it seems that students begin feeling more reassured and confident about their choice.

Student Finance

"It is a wonderful experience for me; there are not many things I can say needs to be improved upon."

The latest survey revealed that learners enjoy studying at UoEO because of the flexibility it allows, the quality of the courses offered, and the support received from the staff. Not only that, UoEO seems to be an ideal option for many self-sponsored students with full-time jobs due to the flexible payment options.

First, the tuition covers every facet of the studies without additional costs. Second, the institution offers a refund to those unsatisfied with the course within the first month of enrolment. In addition, students can either pay their tuition fees upfront or pay in instalments.

Many professionals prefer the last option because they can conveniently pay for their studies off their salary, the amount of paperwork required is limited, and they regularly receive follows up from the Financial Department.

Furthermore, transfers can be made through Flywire, which accommodates international students' needs while allowing them to keep track of all transactions.

Quality of Teaching

UoEO prides itself on providing quality and cutting-edge higher education to students from numerous countries. Bearing that student success is the goal of each facet the University approaches, the quality of teaching is nothing less than noteworthy.

The University's quality assured programmes, reviewed by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and Office for Students (OFS), ensure the institution provides high-quality academic knowledge and confidence moving forward upon completion.

Through the Virtual Learning Environment, students worldwide can access abundant learning materials available to their schedules. Also, thanks to its accessible instant messaging tool, tutor-student engagement is facilitated.

Furthermore, each tutor supports students through module announcements and scheduled Q&A sessions. The latter enables learners to have a more open discussion about the learning material and dismiss any doubts; tutors, on the other hand, mentor the future generation of graduates by providing guidance and sharing expertise.

The above seems to be working well for most of the recently surveyed students, as 84% of them agreed that tutors are industry experts providing the most relevant, up-to-date education possible.

Finally, 80% of students agree that tutors make an effort to create meaningful connections with them and demonstrate their engagement.

Assessment and Feedback

Concerning academic assessments, UoEO has a grading system ranging from 0% to 100% and a strict Grading Criteria structure that every teacher can apply unequivocally.

The latest survey reported that 84% of students find the feedback received from tutors useful, as it can be applied to future assignments.

When asked how consistently tutors apply the Grading Criteria of each class, 71% of the students scored favourably. However, some students commented that it could vary from teacher to teacher, and there is a degree of subjectivity among them.

Learning Platform

"The online facilities are user-friendlier than I expected."

In the latest survey, it emerged that 90% of students are pleased with the VLE's accessibility, as it is user-friendly and showcases necessary materials when needed, helping them organise their schedules thoroughly.

"I expected my course and the learning platform to be quite difficult, but as time has gone by, the whole experience has been easy and a lot more efficient."

In an instance of technical issues with the VLE, 90% of students agreed that sufficient support was provided, which helped improve their overall experience with the learning technology.

Online Library

UoEO e-library provides students with various articles, journals, books, and other necessary reading materials which aids their learning across different courses. It is accessible to all students and readily available on the VLE.

The majority of students agreed that one *"learns a lot from the articles and peer-reviewed journals in the e-library".* However, some commented that navigating the e-library can be rather challenging by saying that *"the use of the library facilities should be put in a simpler technological language and understanding".*

Student Support

Student Support is one of the essential services prioritised by UoEO. An allocated Advisers Team for each course is always available to assist students in several ways, and their response time is between 24 to 48 hours. According to the latest survey, 62% of the student body is appreciative and impressed by the services received.

The Student Support team provides administrative and advisory aid to learners throughout their course duration, who can contact the University to receive feedback and assistance tailored to their needs.

The student population that has not been in touch with formal education in a while has found the Student Support services beneficial in several ways. For instance, in response to one of the open-end questions in the latest survey, one student commented, *"As the course is online, I expected it to be all around harder. However, thanks to the student support team [...] I feel my educational needs are met."*

Study Skills

UoEO provides a dedicated Study Skills Team that supports students in all aspects of their academic work.

The Study Skills services can be easily accessed through the VLE, and they specialise in providing students with a wide range of materials to develop and maintain their academic skills. Numerous students have found this service valuable: *"I've learned a lot about academic writing, such as how to write in formal language, the structure of reports and essays, and the academic writing tool was very helpful, as I found it a very good starting point to understand how to write academically."* Furthermore, students have been able to utilise these skills past their university years.

Due to the differences in time zones, learners can arrange one-to-one sessions with advisors according to their schedules. They can also gain insight into their assessment performance by booking a feedback review session. It has been reported that the availability of the one-to-one sessions and the feedback review sessions have contributed to improving students' academic performance, besides helping them cope with the pressures of part-time online learning.

Disability Support

Thanks to the VLE accessibility and the Student Services Team's dedication, learners worldwide can access excellent higher education courses, including those who strive against disabilities that would otherwise impede their learning opportunities.

UoEO's Student Welfare team provide the best possible support throughout the academic term to ensure students can achieve their maximum potential by limiting stressors that would otherwise affect or disrupt their journey. Their services cover Disability, Safeguarding, Specialist Support, Well-being, and Hardship.

The Disability Team is available to provide support and guidance to students who might have specific requirements. Disabilities range from learning difficulties to mental health and long-term medical conditions, to name a few. Upon inquiry, primary contact with the Disability Officer allows for evaluating the applicability of a Reasonable Adjustment Plan during a one-to-one video call, in which the student's condition, specific needs related to it and how it impacts the learning process will be discussed. In the end, supporting evidence is requested; then, the Disability Officer reviews all information provided and, if applicable, approves a Reasonable Adjustment Plan detailing any adjustments that can be delivered to help the learner.

According to the latest survey, 51% of those who have contacted the Disability Support Team agree that they were provided with beneficial support, guidance and/or reasonable adjustments when requested, while 45% are still undecided.

Student Council

UoEO Student Council (SC) is one of the most active consultation fora at the University. It was established to create student representation and feedback through a medium of exchange between student representatives from various faculties with the Student Experience Team, who meet from time to time to deliberate on matters bordering on the learning community to improve students' experiences.

An aspect of improvement of the SC in 2021 led to the introduction of the Student Council Lead Advocate figure, which attends committee meetings and engages SC members by inciting conversations on topical issues affecting student learning and experiences.

In 2022, the SC convened five sessions via Zoom and later on Microsoft Team: two meetings at the beginning of the year, one mid-year meeting and two in the final quarter. These deliberations comprised feedback from the End of Module Surveys, the Student Voice, and discussions relating to quality assurance processes and procedures consisting of feedback on grading, the effectiveness of seminars, VLE user experience, and the impact of the academic syllabus on employment opportunities and career progression.

These meetings are currently documented in the SC archive, providing follow-up resources on conversations relating to learning and students' experience as relayed by SC members and collated from student surveys carried out by the Student Experience Team.

The SC also provides a platform for idea incubation and execution, such as the SWS - encompassing recent testimonials and feedback on undergraduate academic and non-academic related matters.

Course Representative

UoEO Course Representatives provide student departmental-led change by ensuring that they engage with learners and communicate feedback on course experiences specific to students' programmes at the Course Committee Meetings held from time to time with the Academic Team, senior stakeholders and tutors.

They also ensure that relevant information discussed is translated into actionable feedback, which is further implemented to enhance each UoEO programme experience.

Student Community

One of the most salient topics regarding distance learning is creating and engaging an online student community. UoEO offers a range of services that foster a sense of community, such as the Course Representatives and the Student Ambassador programme, the Student Council, the Discussion Forums, etc.

The latest survey revealed that 45% agreed that the institution provides initiatives that enhance e-learning and promote a sense of belonging to the University.

However, when investigating students' familiarity with the extracurricular activities and initiatives proposed by UoEO, only 24% declared to be very familiar, and 34% to be moderately familiar with them. In addition, only 8% of the students stated they always engage with the initiatives and activities offered, while 41% admitted that they never engage with them.

SECTION 3: STUDENT OUTCOMES

Completing university studies is not a guarantee for achieving the required skills to propel a student towards a fulfilling and productive life or career. However, studying at UoEO is an impactful journey for many students.

A Graduate Outcomes survey conducted in 2019 among 75 alums across 25 study courses showed that 81% had a paid job from an employer,

24% were undertaking another

course of study, training, or research,

Also, while 71% had

a full-time job,

Further data from the UoEO Student Outcomes survey conducted in 2021 reported that 70% found their confidence to be innovative and creative have developed during their course, 68% stated a gain in their leadership skills, and 69% felt that their time management skills improved tremendously.

The survey documented the average salary of alums for each degree; examples include:

- BA (Hons) Business and Marketing graduates earned approx. £40,000
- BA (Hons) Business and Management graduates earned approx. £32,667
- BSc (Hons) Psychology graduates earned approx. £30,000
- LLB (Hons) Law graduates earned approx. £38,000

A focus group comprising seven participants from different courses was run to provide the document with more recent data and understand the perspectives of those still enrolled with UoEO.

The first question concerned why participants enrolled in their course of study, whether for career advancement, seeking employment in a new field, or non-work-related purposes. Most students reported being interested in changing their current career, while a few declared to be studying their programme for career advancement.

The following topic discussed during the focus group concerned what participants plan to do with their degree once their course is completed. A

others are also interested in changing their current

work path, but they are undecided on how they will go about it.

Asking if respondents' plans on what to do with their degree had changed now compared to when they started their academic path revealed different insights.

some admitted their goals and expectations had remained

the same, others indicated they had changed.

The final question wanted to understand if the students believed a traditional university would have helped them achieve their goals better than an online institution. all the respondents admitted that UoEO is the ideal choice, as it allows flexibility while still providing high-quality education.

SECTION 4: RECOMMENDATIONS

In the latest survey, we asked our students for recommendations to improve their learning experience at UoEO. Here are the recurring topics that emerged from their answers:

Grading Criteria

"There is a lack of consistency when it comes to grading criteria and expectations from the students."

Comments on tutors, assessments and feedback seem to go hand in hand, as many students wish to witness more consistency between the grading criteria applied across lecturers. The confusion derives from the fact that the University relies on a detailed and structured grading criteria system, which should make it easier to harmonise tutors' expectations and understanding of what excellent work should feature. However, several respondents don't feel like that is always the case and demand more clarity.

Discussion Forums

"Discussion forums should be revisited."

Most modules include a collaborative assignment (discussion forums) in which students are required to create a series of posts on a given topic in reply to one another. Although the activity is well welcomed by many as it allows students to interact with each other, others find it challenging. However, there is a lack of consensus regarding what should be improved. The main suggested revisions revolve around the limited word count allowed and the lack of consistent contributions from peers.

Q&A Sessions / Seminars

"Quite often, I am the only person on a Q&A session, which makes the whole experience rather lonely and disappointing [...] I would like more Q&A sessions."

Lectures are delivered in the form of Q&A sessions, in which tutors take over, for the most part, analysing the module content more in-depth and providing guidance on upcoming assignments.
At the same time, students can join and ask for clarifications. As an alternative, they can watch a recording at their convenience.

The main concerns are the limited number of sessions delivered in each module, as several students wish to have more, and the lack of participation from peers. Concerning the latter, however, some international students find it challenging to attend the live Q&A sessions because of the time they are held.

Student Experience

"I think the University could do more to enhance the student experience."

Many respondents agreed that more efforts could be made to improve the student experience, particularly regarding student engagement. For example, besides student cards and merch, which are yet to be available for the online branch, many wish for more opportunities to attend webinars with field experts to gain practical insights and informal virtual events to bring students from different departments together and boost their sense of community.

Student Dashboard

"I wish to see some improvement with the dashboard."

Finally, students wish to have a better dashboard that could help them track their progress through their studies, check deadlines and grades, retrieve important documents, and receive notifications on module announcements and other communications, among others.

SECTION 5: CONCLUSION

This Student Written Submission was created to provide Office for Students (OfS) with data from a student perspective concerning the Student Experience and Student Outcomes of those enrolled with UoEO as part of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

Both existing and new data were used to inform the report's relevant sections, but the latter was used more frequently to provide the OfS with updated information.

Student Experience was described in terms of application and enrolment, student finance, teaching, the learning platform, and student services. It emerged that students are satisfied with their overall experience with UoEO, although some matters can be enhanced. To address the area for improvements the UoEO student population suggested, a recommendations section was included in this SWS. The main concerns revolve around the grading criteria, the discussion forums, Q&A sessions/seminars, the student experience, and the dashboard.

Finally, Student Outcomes looked at alums' experiences one year after their degree completion and current students' expectations, providing a great deal of varied data.

We hope that OfS will find this Student Written Submission informative and valuable.