Student Experience Research 2012

Part 1: Teaching and Learning

Student experience research to gain insight into the quality of the learning experience

national union of students

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Foreword

Welcome to the first section of the NUS Student Experience Report which provides a real insight into the student learning and teaching experience. I am delighted to be working with QAA to produce this research and we hope that it will be used by students' unions, institutions and Government to drive changes and improvements in higher education.

NUS believes that a strong evidence-base is essential to lobbying and campaigning and this builds on our research into the student experience over the past three years. I was delighted when reading this report to see the impact of previous research and students' union campaigning in helping deliver more feedback on exams. In similar research in 2010 only 9% of students responded that they received feedback on exams and this has now risen to 39%.

Student engagement practices also seem to be developing within the sector. 69.7% of students said they provided feedback to the institution via module feedback, and 60% via a course rep. Institutions must ensure that they are closing the feedback loop and informing students of the changes they make after receiving this feedback as over 30% of the student surveyed said they did not know whether their feedback was acted upon. Institutions must also continue to work with their students' unions to train and support their course reps and inform students of how they can get involved in helping to shape their course, as many of the students who participated did not feel empowered to be an active co-producer of their experience.

Students also increasingly want to use technology to communicate with their institution, and we must ensure that there are robust technology infrastructures in place to accommodate students developing needs to have more interactions with university staff online.

One final thing I would like to highlight in this research is there is a clear desire for students to receive a more personalised higher education experience. They want more contact time with tutors and their peers, want more keynote speakers, and want to feel like they are part of the academic community and not a passive recipient of education. This is a tough challenge for the sector but one which, if done right, could have a huge impact on student satisfaction with their course.

This report is full of fascinating facts and figures on a whole variety of issues from feedback and assessment, to student engagement and I look forward to hearing how students' unions are using this research to campaign and work with institutions to better meet student expectations.

Usman Ali
Vice President (Higher Education)
National Union of Students

Foreword from QAA

Making sure that students get the best possible educational experience they can is a vital part of what QAA does. Our aim is to meet students' needs and be valued by them. We do this by working with students as partners, responding to their views and needs, and protecting their interests. And we support higher education providers as they aim to meet and shape students' expectations.

Students play an active part in shaping our strategic direction, the judgments we make about higher education standards and quality, and in developing national guidance for higher education institutions. Our student Board member and Student Sounding Board influence QAA's policy direction, and we employ a student reviewer on all of our Institutional Review teams.

This year, we have taken student engagement to the next level by entering into a 12-month partnership with NUS that includes:

- research by NUS into the 21st century student's experience of UK higher education

- training and development to engage students in quality assurance

- bespoke support for 16 self-nominated students' unions that want to develop their quality agenda.

In this, the first of four research reports, NUS has surveyed 5,000 UK higher education students on their experience of teaching and learning. Further reports on independent learning and contact hours, the context for Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects, and the first year student experience will follow.

The findings provide food for thought in our rapidly changing higher education environment. I trust these reports will stimulate debate and inform our thinking on the whole learning experience.

Anthony McClaran
Chief Executive
Quality Assurance Agency

QAA

Executive Summary

This report focuses on the research outcomes of the 2011-12 NUS Student Experience Research in relation to students' perceptions of their learning and teaching. This report is the first in a series of focused reports around student perceptions of their higher education experience. Other reports include: Contact Hours, Subject differences and the 1st Year Experience.

The research was carried out by a triangulation of primary data arising from an online survey, a series of national focus groups and an online discussion forum and the data collection period ran from November to December 2011.

Teaching quality

- Overall, students said that teaching skills were seen as the most important feature of a good quality learning and teaching experience with over 90% of students saying that this was important or very important.

- Students consistently commented that they felt that they wanted more interactive classes. This was not just so that they could practically learn about their subject area, but also to develop peer relationships with their classmates, which they also linked to good future employability skills.

- When asked what would most improve their academic experience, 50.2% of students said that more interactive/group teaching sessions would improve their experience. This was followed by 43.3% of students who would like more individual tutorials and 41.9% who wanted more contact time with a personal tutor.

- Half of students (54.7%) regarded an inspirational lecturer as a motivator to do well in their studies.

Transferable skills

- 78.2% of students agreed to some extent that their course would prepare them for their chosen employment field. Students who took more vocational qualifications were more likely to agree that their course prepared them for their chosen career.

Student voice

- 86.9% of students cited that they had the opportunity to comment on their course. This was mainly though module evaluations surveys (69.7%) and through their tutors (94.8%) and course representatives (60.2%). However only 58.2% of students believed that their feedback was acted upon. Students said that they wanted more opportunities to provide feedback which would affect their current circumstances.

- 52.1% of students said that they were involved or somewhat involved in helping to shape the content of their course, compared to 75% who would like to be. Around a fifth of students said they would like to be involved by either being a course rep or by being involved in setting the assessment criteria. Many students commented that they didn't really understand how they could get involved in developing their course and that this was not made explicit to them when they started their course.

Feedback and assessment

- When looking at the types of assessment feedback students are receiving on their work, students are continuing to request more verbal feedback from their tutors or an independent academic. Currently 42.3% of students said that they received verbal feedback from the tutor who set the work, compared to 66.1% who said that they would like the opportunity to do this.

- 39.3% of students said that they received written feedback on their exams but over half of students said that they would like individual meetings with their tutors, compared to 15.1% who currently do.

- 37.4% of students agreed that they received feedback on their work within 1-2 weeks, and 38.1% within 3-4 weeks. Although 15.3% of students said they had to wait 5 or more weeks for their feedback.

- Most students said that they had the opportunity to receive informal feedback, although 21.6% said that they never received any formative feedback.

Methodology

The research consisted of a multi method approach combining the breadth of a national online survey, along with an in-depth qualitative approach through in-person focus groups at 8 locations nationally, followed by an online discussion group to validate the findings. These combined methodologies provided an holistic approach, creating synergy and allowing for exploration of issues to emerge through the various fieldwork activities.

Two initial 120 minute focus groups in Manchester on November 14th 2011 kicked-off the qualitative research strand as pilots and these were then examined and the discussion guide tweaked for improvements.

The focus groups then ran until November 23rd 2011, overall covering eight locations across the UK, and resulting in an ultimate total of 135 student respondents. Focus groups were video recorded and subsequently transcribed.

The sample sizes utilised are reflective of the student strata and were driven by HEFCE student data statistics, with a key focus on university type, year of study, age, and gender. Recruitment was purposive to this effect, building on a number of routes to students. Respondents were offered incentives to encourage participation and thank them for their time.

The online discussion group provided additional qualitative research and representation, where students got the opportunity to get involved in the research who might not practically be able to make a focus group or have the confidence, etc. Questions posed in this online group validated the findings of the online survey and focus groups.

All research was conducted in accordance with the MRS code of conduct.

The following documents can be downloaded by visiting: **www.nus.org.uk/studentexperience**
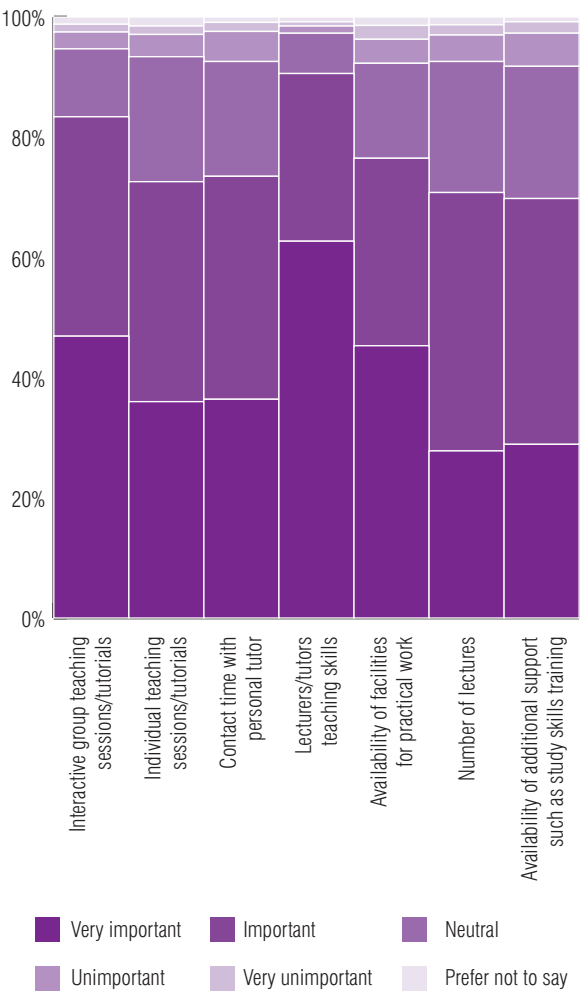
- Online Survey Sample Profile (Demographics)

- Institution Groupings Definitions

- Focus Groups Sample Frame

- Focus Groups Discussion Guide

- Online Discussion Group Discussion Guide

# Findings

Quality Learning and Teaching

When thinking about the learning and teaching experience at university the lecturers/tutors teaching skills were by far seen as the most important with 90.6% (n=4527) of students saying they were important or very important. The next most important factors were Interactive group teaching sessions/tutorials (83.4%, n=4244) and library support (78.3%, n=2400). A breakdown of the results is shown in chart 1 below.

Of least importance was the availability of internet discussion forums (48.0%, n=2400 rated as important) and the lecturer's research record (47.7%, n=2374). There was little variation between the institution groupings and the importance of the lecturer's research record.

Much of these online survey findings are echoed in the focus groups. This can be seen in respondents' responses to the 'typical course weekday creative exercise' where small groups/seminars/practicals were commonly referred to as an example of a positive on their course.

Chart 1: Question 23. Thinking about the learning and teaching experience at university, how important, if at all, are the following? (n=5086)
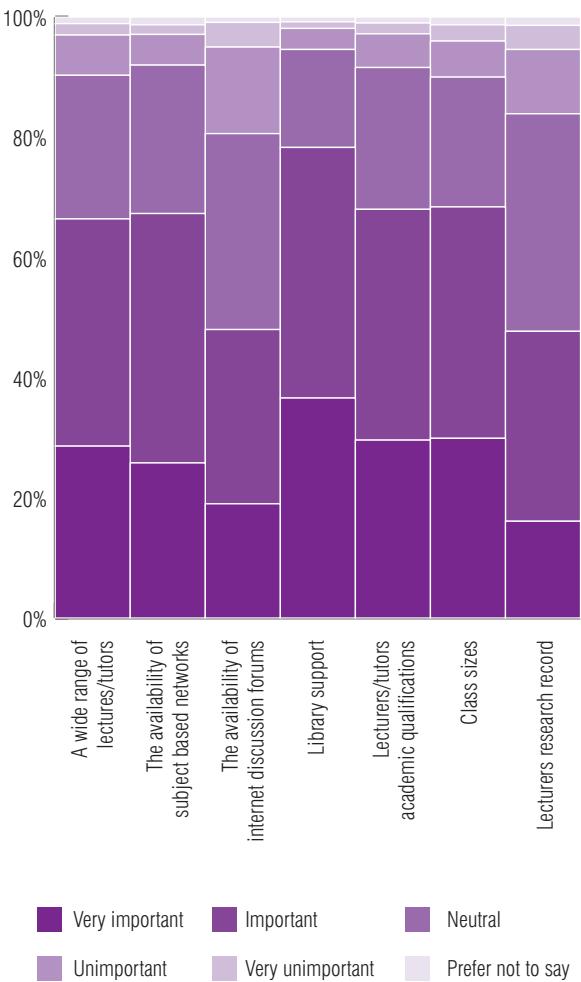
"I like the practical side of it. You feel like you're learning a lot more when you put it into practice, rather than just being told what you should do".

(Male, University Alliance Group, 1st Year).

In fact discussion around small groups/seminars/practicals also began the theme of this type of teaching creating an environment conducive with making class mates. This factor of peer support went on to become a strong theme throughout the groups.

"The seminars are great for tying up loose ends and for preparing you for further lectures as well... I've found that seminars are great for getting to know people on your course. You get to talk to people that you wouldn't necessarily get to meet".

(Male, Russell Group, 1st Year)

Teaching skills were referenced both in terms of positive and negative examples of their course. Positively, respondents highlighted organised teachers. And conversely, this discussion began the theme of reluctant/unenthusiastic teachers:

"One of the seminar leaders is a post-doctorate, but I think he's more interested in research than in teaching. It seems as though teaching is something that he's been landed with".

(Female, Russell Group, 1st Year)

When the focus groups turned their attention to teaching quality, their expectations and experiences, these themes again featured prominently, with smaller groups/seminars/practicals/interactivity being highlighted as something respondents wanted more of.

"We've got an interactive clicker thing. They'll put up a question and see how many people know the answer. That's better in a way because you don't have people who are worried about putting their hand up and feeling embarrassed. They'll put this on in the lecture to check your understanding. It's multiple choice and you get two minutes to work it out. If there are people who get it wrong then the lecturer will go through it with you, if a lot of people get it right then they'll move on".

(Male, 1994 Group, 1st Year)

The concept of 'teaching skills' was also unpacked in the focus groups during this teaching quality section, when respondents were asked to describe a good and bad lecturer/tutor. This revealed that a good lecturer/tutor tended to be: specialist in their subject, had experience of their subject in the working world, were approachable, accessible, passionate, organised, using interactivity, technology and visual aids, plus a sense of humour.

"Partly because her specialist subject is something that I'm interested in particularly. We hit it off and get on really well. There are other members of staff too who are always willing to talk to you and answer your questions. Even if you email them with a question they give you a proper answer. They don't just tell you that the answers are in the handbook. The good ones treat you like a person, not just a student, not as someone they see is getting in the way of their job".

(Female, Russell Group, 1st Year)

Whereas a bad lecturer was described as unconfident, a poor communicator, i.e. just reading their lecture notes, overloaded students with information, unprofessional (specifically swearing), patronising, were not encouraging, assuming too much knowledge.

"One of my lecturers just stands there and reads word for word off the PowerPoint. He doesn't pay us much attention and then people chat in the background. They don't control people and sometimes you can't hear what they are saying. Other lecturers will keep you more interested; they'll involve you and throw in the odd joke every now and then. They are more creative and that keeps us interested".

(Male, University Alliance Group, 1st Year)

Drilling down even further, respondents were also asked to discuss during this section, any examples of good relationships they had with university staff. This revealed desired characteristics to be: a personal approach, where there was mutual respect and a shared interest

in the subject. Staff who 'go the extra mile' in terms of accessibility, pastoral, as well as academic care, and take a long-term interest in the student, i.e. giving them placement/careers advice. Informal meetings were identified as the perfect setting for these relationships to blossom.
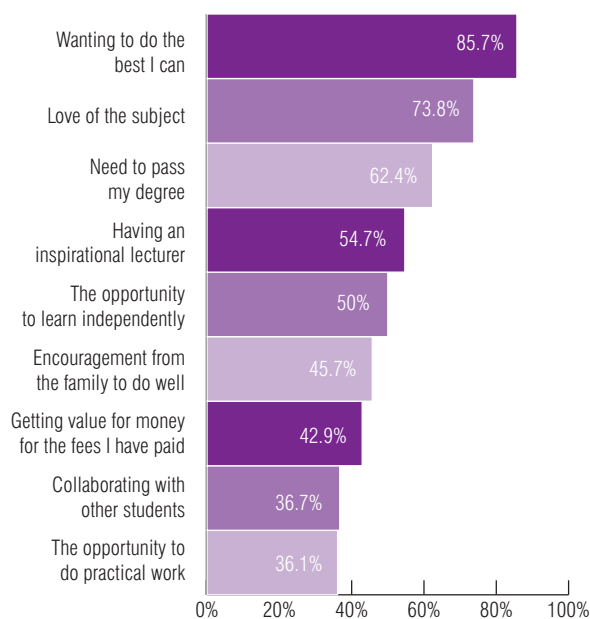
"We have a lecturer... It's like she's not there to make a living, she's there because she has a passion about us. It's a fantastic relationship and I don't think there is anyone in the tutor group who dislikes her. She comes to our level and she gets us. It is a real respectful relationship, both ways".

(Male, Guild HE, 3rd Year)

Motivators for Learning

The online survey suggests that the main motivators of learning were intrinsic to the student. Wanting to do the best they can (85.7%, n=4255), love of the subject (73.8%, n=3661) and needing to pass their degree 62.4% (n=3098) were the main motivators of learning. From an external point of view, having an inspirational lecturer, and encouragement from the family to do well, were regarded a motivators of learning by around half of students (54.7% and 45.7% respectively).
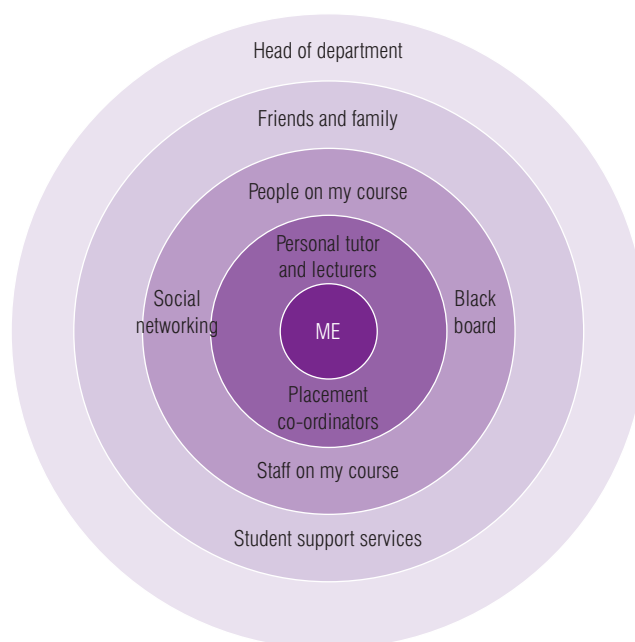
These findings can also been seen in the focus groups, especially when it comes to the 'quality learning experience word association'. Here subject enjoyment was referenced by some respondents. Inspirational/passionate/enthusiastic lecturers were also a common reference.

"The lecturers are so integral to whether or not you enjoy the subject. I've had lecturers talking about interesting things, by people who don't make it seem interesting. And then it works the other way. If the lecturer is really interested then you'll be interested too".

(Female, Russell Group, 2nd Year).

Interestingly, the idea of family encouragement being a key motivator can also be seen when respondents were asked to complete the 'me map creative exercise' in the focus groups. Family and friends were often discussed, although they were generally placed on the periphery of their maps. This can be seen in the following 'me map' example:

Chart 3: Map of those involved in quality university learning experience

Chart 2: Question 32. Which, if any, of the following motivates you to learn? (Tick all that apply) (n=4963)

Motivator	%
Wanting to do the best I can	85.7%
Love of the subject	73.8%
Need to pass my degree	62.4%
Having an inspirational lecturer	54.7%
The opportunity to learn independently	50%
Encouragement from the family to do well	45.7%
Getting value for money for the fees I have paid	42.9%
Collaborating with other students	36.7%
The opportunity to do practical work	36.1%

Employability

Looking to the future, the majority of students agreed to some extent (78.2%, n=3873) that their course would prepare them for their chosen employment field.

We focused further in on this concept of employability in the online discussion group, where respondents were asked to discuss how much, if at all, their course prepared them for life after university. Interestingly this revealed a link between their preferred teaching method of small, interactive groups, as another strength of this type of teaching was the team work that this taught. Such group skills were felt to stand them in good stead for the life after university, as illustrated in this quote from the online discussion group:

"In addition to this the Law school promote group work and often assignments or presentations would be done in groups of about 4 people. This ensures that I will have the ability to work in a team which I will be able to transfer when I leave Uni and start a job.

Furthermore this allows you to look at others work and help them as to how they could improve and vice versa. This is a brilliant skill which prepares me for the world after uni as I have learned it is important to take other people's ideas into consideration.

(Female, Russell Group, 3rd Year)

As can be seen in the latter part of this quote, respondents again linked this preference to the peer support benefit which was also produced from course team work.

Back to the online survey and when it came to the employability of their course, there were differences between the subject types, with a higher level of agreement amongst Medicine, Dentistry and Education students, as shown below in chart 4.

Broadly speaking this chart displays how more vocational courses (Medicine & Dentistry, Education, Subjects allied to medicine, Law, Creative arts & design, Business & administrative studies) made respondents feel more prepared for their chosen employment.

Chart 4: Question 71. To what extent, if at all, do you agree your course will prepare you for your chosen employment field (n=4918)
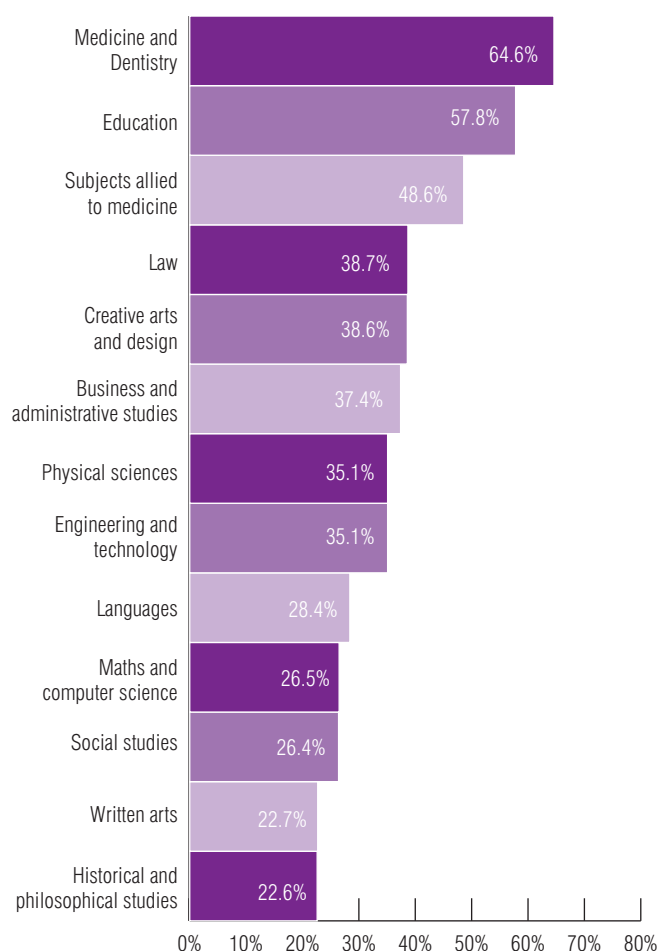
This again echoes the split that was seen during the focus groups discussions of their course's accreditation between those students who were studying vocational course and those that that weren't. And this split was again evident when the focus groups turned their attention to employability, when respondents were asked about their thoughts, if indeed they had any, on what they might do after university and whether their university was making them employable.

"Doing English is not really a vocational degree. I've no idea what I want to do. I might want to write or to go into teaching... I am doing it because I love it. I probably won't come out with a high paying job".

(Female, Russell Group, 1st Year)

Student Engagement

The overwhelming majority of students (86.9%, n=4414) have the opportunity to provide feedback to their university/faculty/department about their course. A substantial proportion (9.5%, n=485) don't know if they have the opportunity to provide feedback or not.

As shown in Figure 5 below, a variety of methods are available for students to provide feedback with module feedback/satisfaction forms being most prominent (69.7%, n=3050). Around three-fifths of students are able to provide feedback verbally to a lecturer/tutor (64.8%) or via a course rep (60.2%) and two-fifths are able to provide feedback electronically online (41.3%) or via email (46.3%). There is a demand for being able to provide feedback online with 56.2% (n=2204) of students wanting to be able to feedback in this way compared to just 41.3% (n=1807) who are currently able to.

Chart 5: Question 34. To what extent, if at all, are you able to provide feedback to your University/faculty/ department about your course? (tick all that apply)
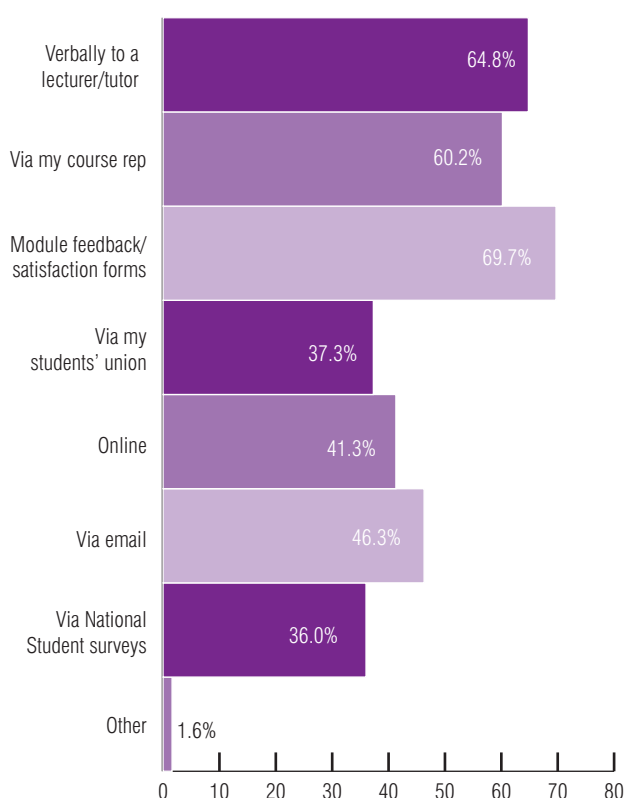
These findings can be seen in the focus groups, where respondents more often than not defined 'student involvement' in terms of the various means of feedback they had come across. Definitions included: feedback, student/course/programme reps, student mentors, staff/student committees, student parliament, course leaders, feedback forms, Facebook groups, dean meetings, and suggestion boxes.

Almost three-fifths of students (58.2%, n=2522) believe that the feedback they provide is acted upon. A significant proportion (31.9%, n=1381) don't know whether or not the feedback they provide will be acted upon.

This is also evident in the focus groups because although various feedback mechanisms were brought to mind when respondents discussed 'student involvement', when asked about their actual experiences of these mechanism, the verdict was generally poor. The overall problem seemed to be that respondents didn't know enough about the mechanisms on offer to them – who to go to, how they worked, how student reps are appointed, and don't hear back having given feedback.

"Is it to do with the influence that we have and the teaching style for example? We do have the student reps and they can give feedback... but it seems to me that it's almost like they have to have it. It doesn't seem to make much difference. I think it's just ticking boxes. I don't think anything actually changes throughout the year".

(Male, Guild HE, 3rd Year)

On top of this, in some cases, serious issues around the anonymity of feedback were cited, e.g. handing back handwritten feedback forms to the very staff they were being asked to feedback on. This severe problem was also evident in the online discussion group, when respondents presented bad experiences they had had surrounding anonymity and action being taken, as can be seen here:

"Feedback to the university is difficult. We are able to make complaints, and are given the opportunity at the end of each year to fill out anonymous

assessment forms for the course. However, as far as I am aware, nothing has ever come of these; a complaint I made once was waved off and the staff member I complained about was copied in on the email, and despite a large percentage of negative feedback from the class nothing has changed in any sector".

(Female, University Alliance Group, 3rd Year)

As is referenced in the previous quote, another problem focus group respondents felt they suffered with their feedback was the timing, with some students highlighting the fact that their opportunity to feedback only came at the end of their course, when any subsequent improvements wouldn't benefit their year.

"I don't think we're involved with it. We've experienced that if we make a complaint nothing changes. It's more of a procedure than anything else... The worst thing that we heard was that whatever you tell us will help us design the course for next year. It was not going to change things this year."

(Male, Russell Group, Masters)

That is not to say that a minority of respondents hadn't had positive experiences when it came to their course feedback. Positive examples generally revolved around occasions when they were presented with evidence that 'the powers that be' had listened to their feedback and taken action off the back it. When this was the case it was interesting to see that respondents tended to have a realistic view of what was achievable and were generally satisfied even just with small steps.

"Yeah, we get feedback from the feedback. If they can't do something because of something we weren't aware of then they have at least taken it on board. It's like they have tried at least to do something".

(Male, Russell Group, 1st Year)

As we know from previous online studies, there is still a disconnect between how involved students feel they are in shaping their course content, curriculum or design

and how involved they want to be as shown in chart 6 below.

Chart 6: Question 37. How involved, if at all, do you believe you are in shaping the content, curriculum or design of your course? (n=5038)
Question 38. How involved, if at all, do you want to be in shaping the content of your course? (n=5038)

	1: Not at all involved	2	3	4: Somewhat involved	5	6	7: Very involved
How involved are you in shaping the content of your course?	21.6%	12.9%	13.4%	28.7%	13.3%	5.7%	4.4%
How involved would you like to be?	8.7%	6.6%	9.3%	35%	18.9%	12.1%	9.4%

■ How involved are you in shaping the content of your course?

■ How involved would you like to be?
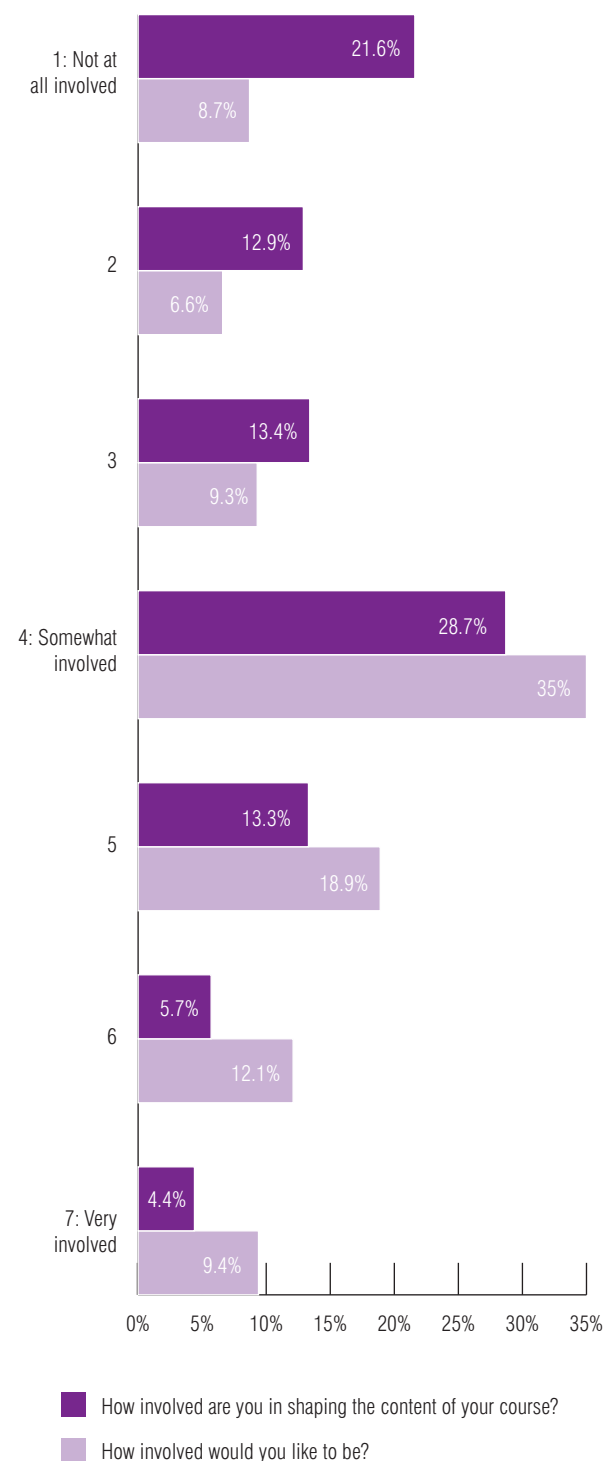
Interestingly international students would like to be more involved in shaping the content of your course with 13% (n=104) saying they would like to be 'Very Involved' compared to just 8.4% (n=305) of UK students.

Students were then asked how they would like to be involved in shaping the content, curriculum or design of their course. Almost three quarters (72.9%, n=3509) said their preferred option would be providing feedback on the course design. Around a fifth would like to be involved by either being a course representative or by being involved in setting the assessment criteria (19.5%, n=937 and 19.0%, n=914 respectively).

The majority of students agreed to some extent (95.5%, n=4804) that it is their own responsibility to engage with their learning. Just three fifths (61.2%, n=3054) of students agree that it is the lecturer's responsibility to engage them in learning as show below in chart 7.

Chart 7: Question 40. Please indicate to what extent, if at all, you agree with the following statements? (n=5038)
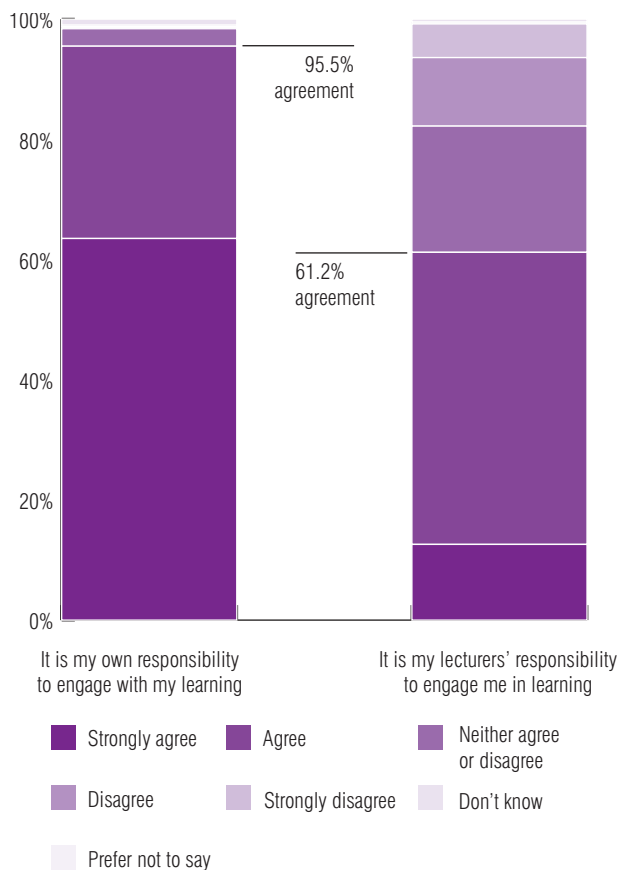
In the focus groups feedback discussion revealed a divide amongst students. On the one hand there were those students who wanted to have the option of feedback if they found there was a problem on their course. Versus those students who were highly engaged with their course, e.g. were student reps themselves, and saw feedback as a key responsibility of theirs. This latter group was in the minority however, whereas the majority of students merely desired feedback on an optional basis if the need arose.

"I don't think you really think about it before you start. It's not on your mind really. It only comes to mind when you feedback to the lecturers. When you go to university you think about all of the initial fears than you do about the intricacies about that... It's good to know that the system is there".

(Female, University Alliance Group, 3rd Year)

"I genuinely want to do it though. There is no point if I'm going to volunteer to do it and then just sit there and not do anything about it. If I'm enriching my student experience then there is nothing wrong with that. I have complained about not having hand outs of the PowerPoint's, but now most of the lecturers provide them".

(Male, Russell Group, 2nd Year)

Some respondents in fact went so far as to voice the idea that they didn't feel, as students, they were in the best position to be so heavily involved in their course.

"I don't think I would ever use it to try and manipulate the course or to have a whole module dropped or something. I think there is a reason why we're the students; we are not the best people to decide what we should be taught as an undergraduate".

(Female, Russell Group, 1st Year)

As we know from other focus groups findings, the perceived responsibility on the part of the lecturer to engage with respondents that can be seen in the online survey, came through in their descriptions of what makes a good lecturer. Such a lecturer was identified

as approachable, accessible, passionate and a user of interactive teaching.

Student Assessment

The majority of students receive assessment/feedback via written grades/marks (86.1%, n=4288) and written comments (77.9%, n=3879) whilst at university. Around half receive feedback on their course work (56.3%, n=2803) and exam marking (54.8%, n=2729). The variety of ways in which students receive assessment and feedback, and how they would like to receive feedback are shown opposite in chart 8.

As shown above, the percentage of students who would like verbal feedback in an individual meeting with the tutor/lecturer who set the work is much larger than the percentage which receives feedback that way. Similarly, there are a larger percentage of students who would like in-person feedback compared to those that actually receive it.

Just focusing on exams, the feedback methods follows a similar pattern with most students (83.0%, n=3763) receiving written grades/marks or written comments (39.3%, n=1781). These are the preferred methods of feedback for exams. Half of students would like to have individual meetings with the tutor/lecturer who set the work so that verbal feedback can be provided however; just 15.1% of students currently receive feedback in this way (see chart 9 on next page).

When asked how long it takes for them to receive feedback on their coursework/exams, almost two-fifths (37.4%, n=1822) said they receive it within 1-2 weeks and a further 38.1% (n=1855) said 3-4 weeks. Although 15.3% (n=745) reported having to wait five or more weeks for feedback.

When separated out by institution group the outlier of these results are that of the Russell Group, 12.1% receive their results in less than a week, and 7.8% of the University Alliance Group don't receive anything for seven weeks or more. However, they do score well within the other categories also, so these may be indicative of subject type. The majority of students do

receive their results within 4 weeks as shown overleaf in chart 10.

Chart 8: Question 51. Which, if any, of the following ways do you receive assessment/feedback whilst at university? (n=4981)
Question 52. Which, if any, of the following ways would be the most useful way for you to receive feedback? (n=4757)

Category	How do you receive feedback?	Which would be the most useful way to receive feedback?
Written grades/marks	86.1%	74.9%
Written comments	77.9%	79.3%
Online comments	39.3%	46.6%
1	42.3%	66.1%
2	32.8%	35.6%
Oral assessment	17.6%	19.7%
Performance review	18.7%	37.6%
In-person feedback	21.2%	46.6%
Coursework feedback	56.3%	53.2%
Exam marking	54.8%	47.4%
Dialogue with an academic	16.9%	32.5%
Laboratory assessment	14.1%	13%
Other	1.1%	0.6%

1=Verbal feedback provided in an individual meeting with the tutor/lecturer who set the work

2=Verbal feedback provided in an group meeting with the tutor/lecturer who set the work

How do you receive feedback?

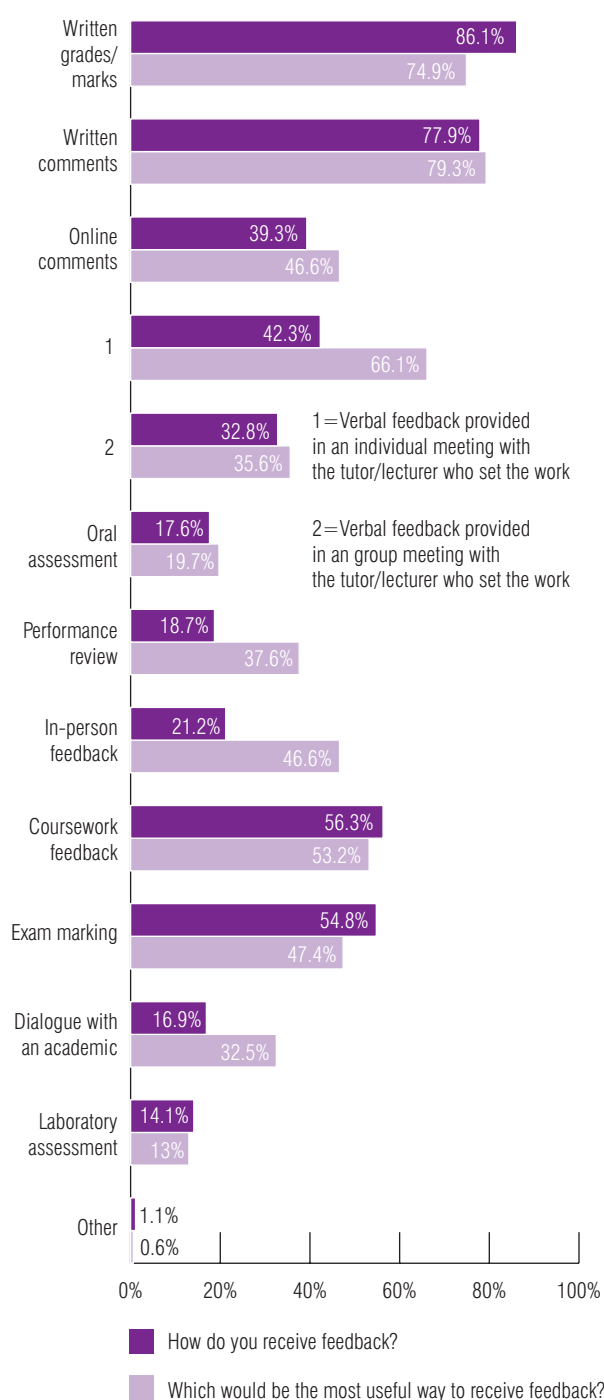Which would be the most useful way to receive feedback?

Chart 9: Question 53. Which, if any, of the following ways do you receive feedback on your exams whilst at university? (n=4335)

Question 54. Which, if any, of the following ways would be the most useful way for you to receive feedback on your exams? (n=4709)
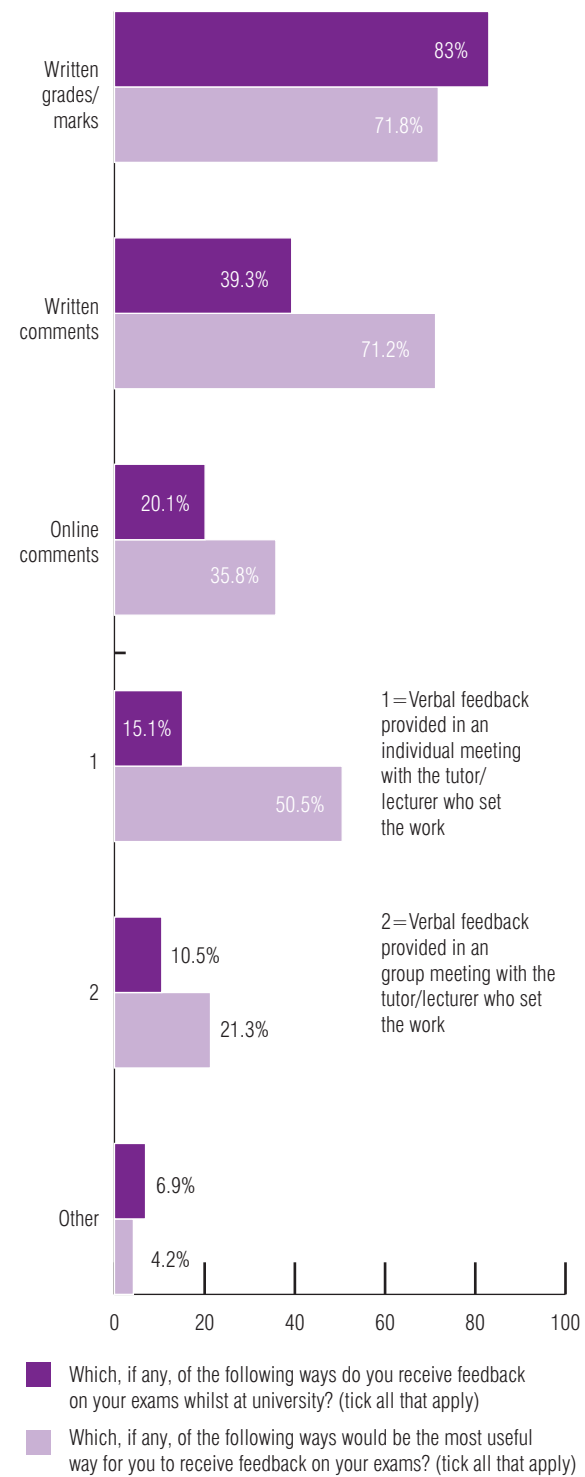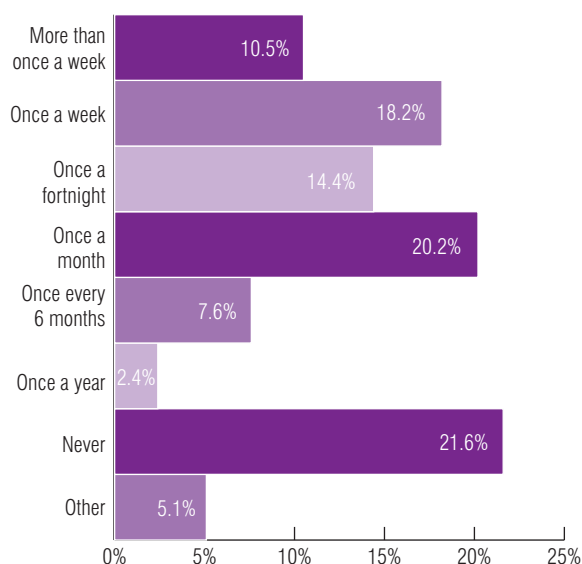
Chart 10: Question 55. How long, on average, does it take for you to receive feedback on your coursework/exam results? (n=4866)

Written grades/marks — 83% / 71.8%
Written comments — 39.3% / 71.2%
Online comments — 20.1% / 35.8%
1 — 15.1% / 50.5%
2 — 10.5% / 21.3%
Other — 6.9% / 4.2%

1=Verbal feedback provided in an individual meeting with the tutor/lecturer who set the work

2=Verbal feedback provided in an group meeting with the tutor/lecturer who set the work

■ Which, if any, of the following ways do you receive feedback on your exams whilst at university? (tick all that apply)

■ Which, if any, of the following ways would be the most useful way for you to receive feedback on your exams? (tick all that apply)

Institution	Time				
	Less than a week	One to two weeks	Three to four weeks	Five to six weeks	Seven weeks or more
1994 Group	8.5%	41.2%	35.9%	10.9%	3.5%
Guild HE	3.0%	22.2%	54.0%	16.7%	4.0%
Million+ Group	7.7%	30.3%	46.7%	12.1%	3.3%
Non aligned	8.0%	33.7%	39.6%	15.5%	3.2%
Russell Group	12.1%	38.5%	38.0%	7.5%	3.9%
University Alliance Group	9.6%	42.0%	32.6%	8.0%	7.8%

Three-fifths of students (n=3489) said that they had the opportunity for feedback on work which did not formally contribute to their overall degree grade as demonstrated in chart 11 opposite:

When asked whether or not they agree staggering assessment, rather than assessment loading/bunching throughout the term would benefit their course, 68.8% of students agreed to some extent (n=3403). Just 5% (n=261) disagreed.

Category	%
More than once a week	10.5%
Once a week	18.2%
Once a fortnight	14.4%
Once a month	20.2%
Once every 6 months	7.6%
Once a year	2.4%
Never	21.6%
Other	5.1%

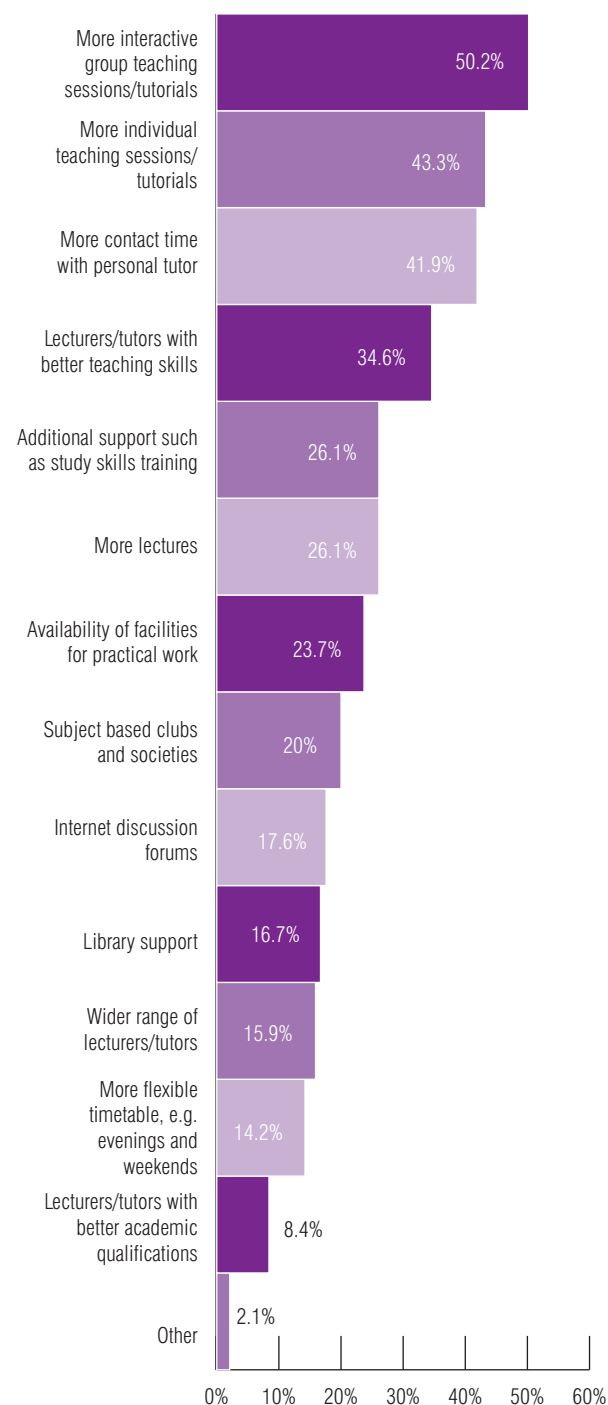## Enhancing Learning and Teaching

To improve the quality of the learning and teaching experiences at university, more interactive group teaching sessions/tutorials were most popular (50.2%, n=2229) followed by more individual teaching sessions/tutorials (43.3%, n=1922) and more contact time with personal tutor (41.9%, n=1862). Just 14.2% (n=632) said more flexible timetables and 8.4% (n=372) said that lecturers with better academic qualifications would improve the quality of the learning and teaching experiences at their university.

So yet more evidence of the student demand for interactive learning, as has been previously illustrated in the focus groups and is also evident when respondents discussed their preferred ways of receiving teaching and through the 'perfect course plan creative exercise' .

The second and third ranked improvements of their learning and teaching in the online survey findings - individual teaching sessions and more contact time with personal tutors – can certainly also be seen in the focus groups. Respondents articulated their expectations of

teaching in terms of more contact hours and seminars, as well as their preferred teaching delivery methods.

Chart 12: What, if anything, would improve the quality of the teaching and learning experience at your university? (n=4440)

Category	%
More interactive group teaching sessions/tutorials	50.2%
More individual teaching sessions/tutorials	43.3%
More contact time with personal tutor	41.9%
Lecturers/tutors with better teaching skills	34.6%
Additional support such as study skills training	26.1%
More lectures	26.1%
Availability of facilities for practical work	23.7%
Subject based clubs and societies	20%
Internet discussion forums	17.6%
Library support	16.7%
Wider range of lecturers/tutors	15.9%
More flexible timetable, e.g. evenings and weekends	14.2%
Lecturers/tutors with better academic qualifications	8.4%
Other	2.1%

"I prefer the seminar because I have more chance to talk to lecturers or tutors. In some lectures the tutors just talk and it's not very efficient".
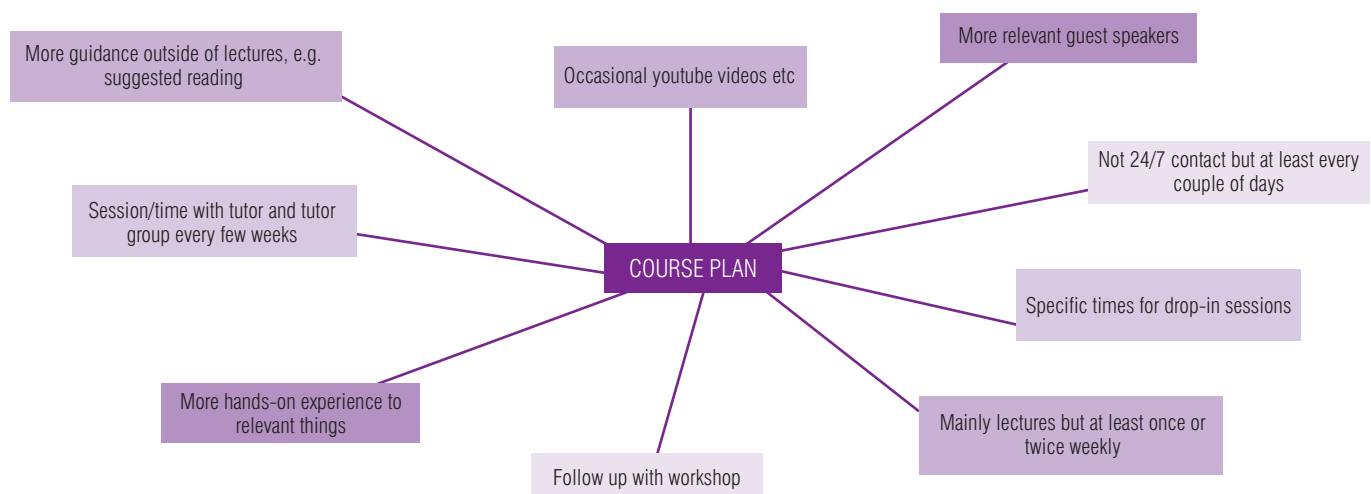
(Male, Russell Group, Masters)

Moreover, during these discussions, respondents linked smaller groups/seminars not only with more staff time, but also more time with their classmates, again highlighting the benefits of peer support, as previously shown in the online discussion group.

"I think a bit more group work would be better. It would be good to hear other people's point of view. Basically it can bring people closer and help with friendships. More group work should be introduced".

(Male, Russell Group, 1st Year)

Interestingly, respondents developed their strong demand for more seminars during the 'perfect course plan creative exercise' and specifically called for courses to be structured in terms of lectures followed by seminars. Respondents felt that this chronology would allow them the optimal learning experience of: 1) lecture (introducing a subject), followed by 2) their own independent learning and reading around this subject plus preparation for the subsequent seminar, 3) in which the subject would be explored in more detail and when they would have the opportunity to ask their questions and learn from peers. This was at the heart of their perfect course plans, as can be seen below in the example exercise.

"Seminars should follow lectures because then you get to develop from the basics that you picked up from the lecture".

(Male, Russell Group, 1st Year)

Another learning and teaching improvement that came out repeatedly in the focus groups – i.e. during discussions about teaching quality expectations versus experiences, their positive and negative learning and teaching experiences and from the 'perfect' course plan creative exercise' - was the idea of industry tie-ins, specifically guest speakers.

"Things like keynote speakers or outside speakers have been the most inspiring for me. Even though they may not be in any better situation to speak to you than the tutors, I think because they are different it helps motivate you. They add different stories and a different dynamic to what you are learning".

(Male, Russell Group, PhD)

Such guest speakers though need to be closely monitored, as they do run the risk of creating bad experiences for students and a feeling that they are subject to a 'sales pitch'.

"There was a guy who came in and gave a lecture, at the end he said "I don't know why you're all doing this course!" and said we'd be lucky to get a job in a call centre as a supervisor".

(Male, Non-aligned, 1st Year)

Figure 13:

19

Industry tie-ups were again repeatedly cited as examples of good course practice during the focus groups dedicated section on employability, specifically guest speakers. Additionally experienced staff were highlighted (which we know is a key characteristic of a good lecturer/tutor), along with placements, networking, careers fairs, and awards. At the top end of course best practice examples were actual modules relating to employability, e.g. careers advice, professionalism, CV writing and interview training (e.g. the employability student online course referenced previously in the online discussion group). At the other end though there was a sense that even if respondents were fortunate enough to have a good careers advice resource at their university/college, it wasn't integrated into their course.

One might have thought that 'flexible learning' could have been identified as a potential improvement to student learning experiences and there was in fact an element of the focus groups that focused on this concept. Overall, however, it wasn't particularly engaged with by the respondents and there was general confusion over the term, with most students confusing it with course/module choice.

This discussion led some students to call for more flexible resources on their course, e.g. library opening times.

"We should have 24 hour learning. In the United States they have access to learning all the time. If I want a book I have to get to the library by 5 o'clock".

(Male, 1994 Group, PhD)

Some were aware of classmates requiring flexible learning because of exceptional circumstances, e.g. long-term sick, and that their university had offered them flexible learning in order to accommodate them. It does seem though that our sample of students didn't prioritise flexible learning within their learning experience.

"The Open University stuff would be more flexible than going to another institution".

(Male, Non-aligned, 2nd Year)

Conclusions

Overall these findings are helpful in continuing to understand what student expectations are of a university experience. Many of these findings help to qualify things we already know about the student experience with learning and teaching, but it has also uncovered where developments have occurred in the sector to meet student needs and new areas for future improvement.

Teaching quality

The quality of the teaching was cited as the most important factor when thinking about what makes a good learning and teaching experience. Students want academic staff to develop their teaching styles to be more engaging, interactive and use technology and props to make the subject more accessible and interesting. Developing an active learning style is a teaching skill which needs to be taught and developed over time, and 34% of students in this research articulated that they wanted their lecturers to have better teaching skills. 68% of students also said that tutors and lecturers academic qualifications were important when thinking about the quality of the teaching. Overall students said that they were more motivated to learn if they had good lecturers who taught the subject well.

Transferable skills

It is clear from this research that the sector needs to do more to articulate the skills gained from a non vocational qualification in order for students to be more prepared for future employment. Students were clear in this research that they valued their experiences of working in small groups during teaching time and through assessments because they understood how these skills could be transferable in an employment context. They did not, however, mention any other transferable skills which they have acquired. Students also need more careers advice and more opportunities to interact with industry in order to build up their confidence and have a better understanding of their future employment prospects in order to set realistic employment goals. It is interesting to note from this research that students did not understand what was meant by the term flexible learning and had a very narrow minded view of what this was. Institutions need

to be better in articulating what flexible and distributed learning is and what the benefits are to students who sign up to these courses.

Student voice

When looking at students perceptions of how their voice is listened to and acted upon, it is clear that there is still a long way to go for institutions to embed student engagement in everything they do. The most common complaints from this research focus on understanding what has happened to the feedback students give and the lack of opportunities to provide timely feedback which will positively influence their current student experience. Students clearly have an appetite for providing constructive feedback and want to be more involved in developing their course but in order for this to happen, institutions need to think about how accessible their systems for development are and whether they are conducive to student engagement.

Feedback and assessment

Finally, questions on assessment and feedback have once again shown a disconnect between what students are looking for, and what is provided by institutions. Students are still requesting more discussion based feedback with academics and their peers, and want feedback to be more accessible and available online. There are some positive developments in the results of this section compared to previous research, and the timeliness of feedback seems to be becoming faster to meet student's needs.

Notes

national union of **students**