

## **Introduction.**

**2021 NSS University of South Wales Student Satisfaction: 10% decrease.**

**2020 = 82% 2021 = 72%**

**The consequence of the global pandemic in the academic year 2020-2021 has had a direct impact on the results of the 2021 National Students Survey with USW students reporting lower satisfaction across all areas from last year, resulting in a 10% decrease in Overall Satisfaction. It must be stressed that this is reflective of the sector as a whole, with comparative levels falling from 83% in 2020 to 75% in 2021. However, it is heartening to see that USW maintained above sector satisfaction levels in Assessment and Feedback, Learning Community, and Student Voice, and maintained sector satisfaction in Academic Support.**

The University of South Wales has been clear in its commitment in recent years to improving the student experience. The time and resource invested in the Student Experience Plan and in developing the 2030 strategy has resulted in direct improvement for students studying at the University of South Wales. We would like to commend the University for the support given to USW students throughout the pandemic; from developing Digitally Enabled Active Learning and No Detriment policies to the roll-out and distribution of over £12 million pounds of Covid support funding directly into the pockets of USW students.

The partnership between the University of South Wales and the Students' Union has strengthened in recent years. We were front and centre of the Student Experience Plan projects and recognise the impact of these as the outputs become embedded in day-to-day delivery. This partnership has strengthened even more during the past 18 months of the pandemic, where the Students' Union has been a member of all committees and working groups for policy development and implementation, learning and teaching projects, and student support.

The primary purpose of this document is to highlight areas we believe should be considered by the institution for investment and development. In addition, as this document has been informed by the students themselves, to highlight areas of best practise. Whilst the Annual Quality Report is a Students' Union owned document, we are keen to work in partnership with faculties and the University to deliver on the recommendations made throughout the report. We are pleased that Academic Board took on board the recommendations of previous USWSU Annual Quality Reports, and that these have become part of the Learning and Teaching Enhancement Committee's scheme of work.

In order to compile this year's report, we have analysed in detail the projects completed by the Student Voice Representatives, Course Representative Assemblies feedback, nominations from the Student Choice Awards, and from motions submitted and debated at our Annual General Meeting. This amounts to over 1,500 individual responses and suggestions to a wide range of different issues. This has been a particularly challenging year for engaging with students and obtaining valid data sources, so we are pleased to have this breadth and depth of evidence to use.

## **Section One: The Student Voice.**

**This section looks at satisfaction with the student voice at USW, an analysis of the current academic representation system, including degree apprenticeships.**

### **NSS 2021 Satisfaction for Student Voice:**

**68% overall satisfied,**

**77% "I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course"**

**70% staff value students' views and opinions about the course**

**57% it is clear how students' views have been acted on.**

Although lower than the previous academic year, we are extremely pleased to see that the NSS results for satisfaction with the student voice is higher than the sector average in three out of the four categories and is on a par with sector in the fourth. The challenging environment in which the University and students operated over the past year has impacted on satisfaction levels, as is evidenced across the sector. The above results are around 10% lower than the previous year and is in line with Overall Satisfaction results which has also decreased by 10%. It is heartening that despite the majority of learning and teaching being online for the final year, 77% of respondents felt that they had opportunities to provide feedback on their course. What is concerning is that only 57% of respondents believe that it is clear that students views have been acted upon. We recognise that the pandemic has skewed the results this year and we need to remember that the respondents would only have had 18 months on campus and receiving face-to-face teaching and feedback.

However, when revisiting previous Annual Quality Reports, we raised concerns around students and feedback in the 2018-2019 report. Using SVR projects that analysed LOOP over USW's three campuses, we reported that 64% of students in Cardiff and Newport were either unsure or did not believe that their 'views matter' to the University, and students at the Pontypridd campuses asked for better clarity and more information on what happens as a consequence of their feedback:

*"If lecturers speak to students saying what issues were highlighted and what they are doing or cannot do about them. This way it wouldn't feel like such a waste of time."*

*"Occasionally they will discuss them if it is a course-specific issue. There is never a discussion around the university wide issues that have been reported. "*

We understand that communicating with students has been difficult in the past year, with an over-reliance on technology and a lack of in-person teaching due to the pandemic restrictions. We recognise that giving feedback to students has been reliant on academic staff, particularly in the past year; however, this creates an anomaly. Although course and module leaders can respond to student comments raised through LOOP or other methods, they do not have the authority to formally action colleagues or change University process; this is the role of academic managers and above. Yet students believe it is their lecturers, module and course leaders that will enact change as this is who they have the most contact with, and do not understand that there are specific University processes and policies that needs to be followed. This leads to frustrations if they feel that their feedback is not dealt with

appropriately or in a timely manner and goes some way to explaining why the NSS score is lower in “it is clear how students’ view have been acted on.” We urge the University to look in depth at this, as we believe that if students consider their feedback to be valuable and recognise that they are valid contributors to their learning experience, they will feel more empowered to engage. In turn this will have a positive impact across all areas of the NSS, and not just increase scores in this one specific area.

### **Students’ Union NSS Score.**

We are disappointed with the Students’ Union score in the NSS, particularly when the Student Voice satisfaction score remains high. This suggests that as a Students’ Union we need to reinforce our purpose and our position as a vehicle for change amongst our members. Through open text comments, we can see that there are misunderstandings between the differences of the university’s support team and our own internal structures. As a predominant number of students answering this question did so with a 3, the SU is committed to ensuring our members have clarity of our mission to improve their academic experience.

We have worked hard to increase our score over the previous years and were pleased that prior to this year we had gained year-on-year increases. We recognise that we are still below the sector average, and will continue to work hard to increase our score. We hope that through continuing our hard work in supporting and facilitating our Course Representatives and our Student Voice Reps, coupled with increased visibility across the University, students will understand the role of the Students’ Union in representing their academic interests.

We are currently engaging with the NSS / OFS consultation around question 26 and look forward to greater clarity around this question, which we believe will positively impact on our score.

### **Recommendations For the University:**

- **Clarity over what happens with the feedback; where it goes, how it considered, and how changes are made.**
- **University-wide approach to closing the feedback loop to students.**

### **The Students’ Union is committed to:**

- **Continually update our student representatives on University successes and ensure this is disseminated to their peers.**
- **Introducing online forums for students’ to regularly feedback, discuss, and vote on change throughout the academic year– in addition to our Change Week.**

## **Academic Representation System**

The Students’ Union runs and facilitates the academic representation system for the University. We have seen engagement in this rise year on year, as students realise the benefits of becoming engaged in influencing their learning experiences, as well as raising issues in real time. However, the number of students engaging with us during this academic year is practically the same as the previous year,

which raises the questions of how do we reach the students who are not engaging with the system, and is it the same courses that are not engaging? We plan to analyse this over the forthcoming year (2021-2022), and work with the HOLTSEs and Quality and Academic Services to identify if there are any issues with specific courses or schools or is this now the correct number of Course Representative for USW.

**Number of Course Reps:**

**2020-2021: 650**

**2019-2020: 646**

**64% of Course Reps trained in 2020-2021, a 2% increase from 2019-2020.**

When completing their end of year feedback forms 98% of students stated that they were satisfied with the support they received from the Students' Union during their time as a Course Rep, and 95% of Course Reps agreed that the current scheme is effective.

**Course Rep of the Year: Natasha Harris, Graphic Communication (FCI).**

*"Always up for emailing staff when we have a problem and voicing our problems. Really active in the course group chat if something is wrong and she has given me personal 1-2-1 support online when I have struggled in the past."*

*"Natasha's incredibly friendly and easy to talk to, always offers to help people with projects and engages in course discussions/group chats and takes people's concerns to the tutors in an effective way. Through their communication with tutors, we've had a number of resolutions this year on the course."*

**Number of SVRs – 18,**

**100% of SVRs trained.**

100% Student Voice Reps fed back that communication from the Student Voice Team was effective over the year, with 80% saying the same of University staff. However, only 20% of Student Voice Reps believed that there was effective communication from Course Reps. We will address this in our training programmes, Course Rep Assemblies and SVR forums during the next academic year (2021-2022), as we recognise that this is a reoccurring issue.

*"I really enjoyed working on boards such as LTEC and working groups"*

*"HoLTSE was amazing and always helpful and willing to meet, even arranging meetings to check up on me to make sure I was doing ok in my role, my course and generally"*

*"The lack of response from course reps at times caused concern over whether I was being effective within my role".*

**SVR of the Year – Ellis Thomas, FCI.**

*“Ellis is so open and friendly, as well as dedicated in dealing student feedback and resolving them promptly with a professionalism that impresses everyone enormously. He gives frequent updates about meetings and is so active in helping students with their issues via course representative action.”*

*“Ellis is everything an SVR should be. He’s a very naturally friendly, approachable and inclusive person, who genuinely has a passion for improving the student experience. On top of that, Ellis is reliable, communicative, and always professional.”*

*“Ellis isn’t the loudest SVR, and I feel like for this reason he often flies under the radar. However, it’s for this reason that he is so great in their role. Whenever you ask them what FCI’s doing, you find that he’s got several different conversations on the go with various people, and is always working on more ways to help FCI peers. Ellis is consistently in touch with all FCI Course Reps, and always takes the opportunity to chair or attend Course Rep Assemblies to understand what issues are being raised”.*

*“I feel very lucky to have worked with Ellis over their time as an SVR, and to have seen their confidence grow. I can’t think of another more deserving of this award.”*

**Recommendations For the University:**

- **The University Heads of Learning, Teaching and Student Experience and the University Quality and Academic Services to work with the Students’ Union to identify if there are any specific issues with engagement in certain schools.**

**Commendation For the University:**

- **The close working relationship between the faculties Heads of Learning and Teaching, the Quality and Administration Services and the Students’ Union’s Student Voice Team enables the success of the academic representation system.**

**The Students’ Union is committed to:**

- **Ensuring our Student Voice Representatives feel empowered to confidently challenge and support the University in the improvement of their faculties academic provision.**
- **Increasing our pool of Student representatives who actively engage in Quality work.**

**Degree Apprenticeships.**

The University has involved the Students’ Union in its’ planning for the delivery and administration of Degree Apprenticeships. We were particularly pleased to be involved in the QAA Degree

Apprenticeship Review Wales; through this process we gained the corroboration that degree apprentice learners were engaging in the current academic representation systems and was reassured that the learner is an active partner in their individual learning and teaching. This was further corroborated by the QAA commendation of good practice:

*The collaboration between employer, apprentice and the University in developing projects which support them in their individual workplace situations to achieve their learning outcomes"*

*(paragraph 18, QAA Provider Report, April 2021).*

We value our involvement in the design of learner representation structures and are pleased that the University is taking seriously the challenge of how to guarantee the Learner Voice is front and centre of delivery. We recognise the difficulties of ensuring all learners have equal opportunity to comment on their learning, and to develop apprenticeships that enable them to be full partners in their learning. This is particularly challenging when the delivery is completely off-site and delivered through a number of separate employers, such as the Police Degree Apprenticeship programme. We are reassured that the University is fully aware of its' requirements in this and are pleased to be involved in the reapplication process for ROATP (Register of Apprenticeship Training Providers), as well as being a member of the USW Degree Apprenticeship Governance Board.

#### **Recommendations For the University:**

- **The University should continue to work closely with the Students' Union in developing structures to capture the Learner Voice.**
- **The University should examine how to further include the learner voice in all areas of degree apprenticeship development and governance.**

#### **Commendation For the University:**

- **Inclusion of the Students Union as full members of the Degree Apprenticeship Governance Board.**

#### **The Students' Union is committed to:**

- **Creating, recruiting, training and supporting dedicated representatives at an apprenticeship level.**
- **Working in partnership with the University to monitor and engage students in discussion over the provision of their apprenticeships.**

## **Section Two: The Learning Community.**

**This section looks at the Student Choice Awards, and creating communities at the University.**

**NSS 2021 scores:**

**Overall satisfaction: 69%**

**"I feel part of a community of staff and students": 62%**

We get regular feedback from students on the high regard in which they hold their lecturers. The majority of students are happy with their academic experiences, which is evident through the nominations received in the Student Choice Awards.

**SCA 20/21 – 1,041 nominations**

**SCA 19/20 - 1,235 nominations**

The nominations provide the Students' Union with excellent data on what students' value and how they want to be taught. Engagement in this decreased in the past academic year, however this was expected due to the global pandemic. The nominations received highlighted the appreciation of students with the response of the University in continuing their education in the face of the pandemic:

*"Inspiring virtual lectures and activities that have kept the community feeling of the course".*

*"Dependable structure and reliable consistency in the delivery, with slides / videos released in advance on the same day every week".*

The data received through the awards was also used to inform the University's Impact Case Study submission for the Higher Education Innovation and Recovery Fund.

### **Recommendation For the University:**

- **To continue to work in partnership with the Students' Union to explore more detailed analysis of the nominations.**

### **Commendation For the University:**

- **The recognition of the valuable data held within the nominations and using this data to improve the student experience.**

### The Students' Union is committed to:

- **Celebrating the successes of the staff members and seeking that their good-practices are shared across the institution.**
- **Celebrating and motivating our students in their academic achievements and their duties as student leaders.**

### Creating student communities at USW.

We recognise that the past academic year has been exceptional in terms of organisation and delivery, with the pandemic creating challenges that had not been considered prior to 2020. Whilst the NSS score for feeling part of a community of staff and students is above sector, it is still relatively low at 62% when compared to the University's other scores. This is corroborated with pre-covid research undertaken by SVRs (academic year 2019-2020), which indicated students found it difficult to make friends at university. At that time, 42% of students who responded to the research indicated that they struggled to make friends, although this decreased through increased engagement in social learning settings and informal study sessions. When questioned if they felt a sense of community within their course, two thirds responded positively but when asked if they felt part of a community at USW, only 38% indicated that they did. This co-aligns with the response in this year's NSS; it is logical to assume the question is relative to their course as the majority of NSS questions relate to course experience.

We are concerned that this situation is being exacerbated by the restrictions of the pandemic and would urge the the University to consider more face-to-face teaching as soon as possible, as well as creating opportunities for on campus engagement. Feedback received by the Students Union this term, as well as from the open comments in the National Student Survey, illustrates this should be considered an urgent priority:

*"I don't have any friends at University. I know the people on my course, but I only know them through a screen".*

*"I just get on with it, but it would be nice to have more of a friendly vibe and enjoy uni a bit more".*

*"Don't feel like I am a part of a community anymore; rarely have a chance to interact properly with course mates. I felt like I had to push all my mental health aside just to complete my work."*

The feedback received by the Students' Union is that students who are living at home are finding it harder to make friends and connect with course mates, as the opportunities for social interactions haven't been available to them. We are worried that feelings of isolation and loneliness will have a negative impact on the mental health of our students.

This mirrors research conducted by a SVR into the experience of mature students at USW. Findings from the research illustrate how mature students considers there to be a social divide amongst mature students and the younger students at USW. This can prove problematic as it could lead to risks of anxiety or mature students becoming isolating within their respective courses. What is evident is that without the proper support, academic performance can suffer as a result of poor mental wellbeing.

This social divide is now no longer explicit to mature / younger students, but also to those who live at university / choose to stay at home, as the informal on-campus learning and social interactions are



now limited. The University needs to understand there is a real risk to students becoming disengaged with their courses through loneliness, and an increased risk of dropping out.

**Recommendations for the University:**

- **The University should encourage and support informal course events.**
- **The University should reintroduce more face-to-face teaching as soon as possible.**
- **The University should create an updated support webpage for mature students, providing a comprehensive guide to the resources and support services available to them.**

**The Students' Union is committed to:**

- **Fostering and supporting student communities at all levels and modes of study.**
- **Providing training and adequate resources for our student groups and leaders to facilitate student activities.**
- **To review our own representative structures and ensure they are relevant to our membership, and the communities they represent.**

## **Section Three: Learning Opportunities.**

**This section examines ways of improving students' graduate outcomes through participation in nation-wide academic events, and decolonising the curriculum.**

**NSS 2021 satisfaction for Learning Opportunities:**

**78%: overall satisfaction**

**76%: "My course has provided me with opportunities to explore ideas or concepts in depth".**

**80%: "My course has provided me with opportunities to bring information and ideas together from different topics.**

**79%: "My course has provided me with opportunities to apply what I have learnt"**

### **Improving graduate outcomes through participation in external events.**

"Knowledge is of no use, unless it is put into practice" (AskIdeas, 2016).

It is clear the University recognises the importance of applied learning and teaching, evidenced through the 2030 Strategy:

*"Interdisciplinary team-based learning will connect to problems beyond the classroom, with curriculum that creates a deep sense of belonging, engagement, networking and pride."*

The academic process can be deemed effective only if students recognise how to implement their education in practical applications. Although assessments and examinations are aimed at testing the knowledge of a student, competency in the subject matter is gained through practice, application and problem solving. SVR research has indicated students have an interest in participating in national events and competitions but are unsure or unaware of how to proceed in this. A further barrier to participation is time and resource, especially when students are focussed on their studies.

Through encouraging students to participate in national competitions, the University will create opportunities for applied learning, as well as raising the profile of its commitment to supporting and engaging with global partners. Research has identified a number of global competitions that are relevant to the academic portfolio of the University, and that also complement the ambitions of the 2030 strategy, such as:

[Game dev challenges: Search for a Star & Rising Star - Grads in games](#)

[DBACE | Deutsche Bank Awards for Creative Entrepreneurs](#)

[Sustainathon UK 2021 \(tcsapps.com\)](#)

[Challenges – Copernicus Masters \(copernicus-masters.com\)](#)

Participation in national competitions will encourage interdisciplinary research, improve teambuilding and project management, as well as provide opportunities for staff / student partnerships. It also nurtures ambition whilst demonstrating to our students that they have the knowledge to compete on a global scale.

#### **Recommendations for the University:**

- **Use Unilife or Careers to promote up-to-date information of national academic competitions.**
- **The University to encourage student participation in academic events and competitions through including this, where appropriate, as assignment questions.**
- **USW to host its' own academic competition, in partnership with strategic partners, to encourage student research and entrepreneurship.**

## **Decolonising the Curriculum**

Jones (2018) stated that Universities should aim to raise awareness of diversity in teaching and learning practice and to promote a culture of inclusiveness wherever necessary.

The National Union of Students is firm in its campaigning to decolonise the curriculum, and suggests the following to ensure a more culturally inclusive curricula:

*"If we take our education system, decolonising it could look like exposing how universities original funding came from the enslavement of Black people. The second step would be to collectively acknowledge that this led to universities producing knowledge that perpetuate white supremacy. The third step could be to collectively imagine alternatives where our teaching structures and learning practices would no longer centre colonial knowledge and methods. Finally, this would lead to the dismantlement of the current education system, in order to create one free from white supremacy."*

The NUS have developed resources and a Decolonisers Library to inform and aid in developing campaigns. Its main purpose is to provide information on what decolonising is through a resource bank of different mediums to explore and expand knowledge around the decolonising movement.

<https://www.nus.org.uk/campaigns/decolonise-education/mixed-media-library>

The Students' Union Annual Quality report 2018-2019 reported that SVR research on international students' learning experience indicated that our students considered cultural differences and different teaching methods to be the biggest barriers to learning when studying at the University, and not so much language barriers. Only a very small number of students who participated in the research considered their lectures and tutorials to be culturally inclusive, and there is a clear call for lecturers to use a range of diverse examples when teaching.

Through progressing its' work in decolonising the curriculum, the University would contribute to developing a more racially inclusive and diverse environment. A greater focus on this could contribute to reducing the black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) student attainment gap, as outlined in the UUK and NUS 2019 report "Black, Asian and minority ethnic student attainment at UK universities: #ClosingtheGap".

#### **Recommendations for the University:**

- **The University should ensure culturally diverse curriculum at the validation / re-validation process.**
- **The University should look develop a resource bank for each faculty, mirroring that of the NUS Decolonising Library. This will aid academics in diversifying their courses at the revalidation stage, and also act as a depository / research bank that both staff and students can populate.**
- **The University should develop racially diverse and inclusive environment through a curriculum that reflects minority groups' experiences. This greater focus should ensure BAME students will have a good sense of belonging at USW.**
- **The University needs an understanding of how a poor sense of belonging might be contributing to low levels of engagement, including with curriculums, and progression to postgraduate study, whilst embedding good practice.**

#### **Commendation For the University:**

- **The work undertaken by CELT in this area, and the recognition of its' importance by LTEC.**

### **Conclusion.**

The past year has been unprecedented in terms of delivering education to our students and supporting them in their studies, whilst at the same time keeping them safe. We would like to congratulate the University on the measures it put in place to enable this to continue.

The University's commitment to investing in the student experience over recent years is evident. The importance placed on the student voice illustrates how the University and Students' Union works together to engage with students and staff to improve the learning environment.

Although it is clear from this report that there are some areas that could improve, it is fair to say that the University is listening to student feedback and maintains an open dialogue with the Students' Union and its students.

We hope the University will take on board the recommendations contained within the report and look forward to supporting the University in driving these forward. We are confident that through working together, in the spirit of partnership, students studying at the University of South Wales will have an excellent student experience.