

2021 National Student Survey Response

Written by Daniel Lo – Deputy President (Education)

Thank you for reading the Imperial College Union's (ICU) 11th annual National Student Survey (NSS) response. The NSS is a key measure for the College and Union on overall student satisfaction. 74% of final year Imperial students completed the survey, and the College received over 1000 free-text comments.

Key findings from the NSS survey show:

- Overall student satisfaction at Imperial College London is now at 84.5%, an increase of 3.1 percentage points (pp) on last year's score.
- The College achieved the best score in the Russell Group and all London-based universities, and ranked the 15th across the sector, compared to 95th in the previous year.
- Students are mostly satisfied with the College's learning resources (87.5, -2.0pp), teaching (86.3, +2.6pp), and learning opportunities (82.9, +1.9pp).
- Assessment and feedback received the most criticism across most departments, which is reflected in the NSS scores (63.5, +3.5pp). Although improvement is evident in this category, the College still score below the national benchmark of 64pp.

The NSS and the Covid-19 pandemic

The pandemic has presented significant challenges for students in their final academic year. They have spent a year in isolation, spread out in different time-zones across the world, which meant that social connections had to be maintained through virtual platforms. Despite this, over three quarters of students (77.7, +0.3 pp) stated that they felt that they were a part of a learning community, which demonstrates that the efforts that the College were made to maintain these connections were not in vain. The Union notes the commendable effort made by the College to support students during the Covid-19 pandemic, and we believe that this has resulted in an elevated NSS score this year.

ICU hope that the recommendations we provide, coupled with the College's excellent pandemic response, will support Imperial in maintaining their strong NSS score over the coming years. If the pandemic continues, we hope that the recommendations to support student mental health and wellbeing will be particularly useful, as student mental health has been affected considerably by the pandemic and its impacts.

The Union's NSS response this year

The purpose of the recommended actions in this report is to help stakeholders, including students, the College, and ICU, to form active partnerships with the aim of identifying and resolving shortcomings that have hampered student's educational experience. This year, the report will outline both academic and wellbeing recommendations based on the NSS results. It is strongly recommended that the departments use this report, alongside the departmental recommendation reports, to reflect on their performance over the past year and try to implement the recommended actions. ICU will work closely with student volunteers in the academic and wellbeing representative networks to encourage the departments to form an

action plan in response to the listed recommendations and ensure student representatives are regularly updated on the progress.

ICU and the College enjoy a strong collaborative relationship for the benefit of our students. College staff and ICU are working closely together to improve courses and provide relevant support for departments. This report provides the following recommendations for the College to focus on the key themes that are commonly raised in the NSS results:

1. Improving the quality of coursework feedback
2. Improving the punctuality of coursework feedback
3. Improving communication between students and their departments
4. Developing a stronger student community and more pastoral support
5. Balancing workload and avoid timetabling clashes
6. Improving mental health support

The Union is looking forward to working in partnership with the College to implement these recommendations to increase student's satisfaction.

1. Recommendations for the College

A student's academic experience and their wellbeing during their time at Imperial are of equal importance, and we have introduced more specific recommendations related to the wellbeing of students. The NSS is focused on the students' academic experiences in the institution. We believe that the NSS scores do not fully reflect how students are satisfied with the College's wellbeing services and support. Students can only raise their wellbeing related concerns through the free-text comments. Our analysis shows that work needs to be done at a College level to improve wellbeing. Although many of the issues raised by the departmental representatives address the local problems with local solutions, it is difficult for the departments to make changes without the support from the College. The College should be the forefront of tackling these issues to increase the satisfaction of students.

Recommendations on Academic Issues

1) Improving the quality of coursework feedback

Similar to last year's results, Assessment and Feedback is still the lowest NSS category at Imperial by a significant margin. While this is the case at many other universities, the College rank in the 4th quartile across the sector, despite ranking 15th overall.

The major concern of students is that **feedback received is often vague and not constructive**. Students feel as though their feedback is often too short and does not provide sufficient suggestions for them to improve on.

"Feedback received on coursework and exams is very vague and almost non-existent. Therefore, it is very hard to improve and to know what you did wrong. On top of that, exam corrections take very long (months) which does not allow you to reflect on what you did well or not as by the time you get the exams back you have almost forgot what the essay questions were." - Life Sciences

“Feedback and mark schemes are acceptable; however, it is often not clear what is required to achieve the highest-grade band - specifically the top grades of the highest band. Marking for exams is reasonable but marking for projects and coursework is very dependent on the supervisor. There is no standardised mark scheme for projects leading to huge discrepancies between quality of work, amount of work, and final grade achieved by different groups doing the same project.” - Mechanical Engineering

“One minor issue was that coursework feedback tended to be given quite late and was not very detailed (especially in the first couple of years). It would have been helpful to have more constructive feedback on what to do better, e.g., when writing lab reports, etc.” – Bioengineering

Recommendation:

Develop a Feedback Quality Reporting mechanism through which students can report examples of poor feedback on their work, if attempts to address their concerns within their Department have been unsuccessful. College should ensure appropriate resource exists to monitor and address these reports.

2) Improving the punctuality of coursework feedback

Slow feedback is very common across all departments, and this is reflected throughout student’s comments in the NSS.

“Little to no chance of applying engineering knowledge - most work is concerned with writing long, pointless reports with little guidance. Feedback is painfully slow, and you don't even get the opportunity to see your exam scripts after marking.” - Aeronautics

“Very slow feedback for lab reports. Tight deadlines for lab reports. Poor assistance in the lab. Lab work often unconnected to what we're learning in lectures making it difficult and tough to understand what's going on.” - Physics

The Feedback Traffic Light Process, which has been recommended as good practice by QAEC, outlines how departments could manage and monitor feedback return from staff to students. **We recommend that the College should investigate the adoption of this Policy in department and how well they are adhered to.** Departments should set their departmental norms for the return of academic feedback to ensure feedback given to students is of a high standard. In cases where feedback is delayed, this should be communicated to students via email, specifying how long the delay will be. If a module/course is often experiencing feedback delay, the senior departmental members should liaise with the academics to rectify this quickly. Departments should ensure their staff are supported to effectively prepare, teach, and mark student’s assignments at the same time. Likewise, the College should provide support for the departments to do so.

Recommendation:

Investigate the adoption of the Feedback Traffic Light Process which has been recommended as good practice by QAEC, to determine how widely these recommendations have been adopted (and how well they are adhered to) within Faculties and Departments. Request Faculty Education Committees discuss these findings and develop an action plan to further the implementation of this Policy.

3) Improving communication between students and their departments

Student communication is a complex issue, involving several different interactions at various levels of the College. The interaction between academics and students appears to have a significant impact on students' overall satisfaction. This is evident in multiple areas, including assessment arrangements, assessment feedback, relationships with academic staff, timetabling, course organisation, student support service, and lack of students' voices in college-wide decisions. Many free-text comments in the NSS relate to problems with poor departmental communications:

"There have been many administrative errors and miscommunications which negatively impact student satisfaction. Timetables are always released late, and staff can be hard to contact. I would have enjoyed my course a lot more if the department had not been so notoriously disorganised." - Bioengineering

"Some lecturers lack communication during the pandemic and don't respond to our questions on discussion boards." - Chemistry

The lack of student input before decisions are made, shrouding of details around decisions, and clear tick boxing of consultation (proven by the fact all meaningful consultation that wasn't patronising and disrespectful has been led by those not at the top of the School and Faculty structures) has been frustrating and at times insulting." - Medicine

As many of the necessary changes sit at this level, ICU have made a number of recommendations at department level to resolve this. However, we recommend that College works with departments to implement communication strategies which account for the needs for the students and the course.

Recommendation:

Develop a communication action plan for each Department, detailing how the Department intends to communicate openly with students through the year (e.g. via newsletters, town hall meetings, drop-in sessions). This plan should also identify areas where the College can better support the Department's communication efforts, such as through training for key student-facing staff.

Recommendations on Wellbeing Issues

4) Developing a stronger community and more pastoral support

Students in numerous departments have emphasised the desire to feel more connected to their learning community and be more engaged with their teaching staff.

"While the department has many warm and approachable staff members, there is a lack of community within the department (and within Imperial as a whole)." - Physics

Despite the challenging circumstances of the pandemic, it is important to note that some departments have succeeded in creating a wholesome community in which both students and staff feel supported.

"Everyone is very approachable in the department. They organise plenty of events that make you feel a part of the community. – Mathematics"

“Community, both student and academic – top class!” – Materials

To continue to improve the sense of community within the learning environment, **it is important to promote the re-introduction of in-person social events that take place within departments**, with reports published by each department on what social events have taken place. Departments can collaborate with departmental societies to organise these events which serve to be a source of connection for both students and staff and promote a greater sense of belonging. Group meetings that are held by each tutor, with all their tutees at once, can also be used as an additional avenue of support and interaction.

Additionally, essential pastoral support for students is delivered via personal tutors. It is crucial to ensure that personal tutors have adequate training and resources to deliver signposting for welfare needs. Training on signposting should be provided in the form of a presentation by Student Services, with an accompanying document that is readable and reference throughout the academic year.

Recommendations:

Ensure that a sufficient provision of social and community-building events exists for students by requiring each Department to prepare, in conjunction with the relevant Departmental Society, a biannual report detailing the events that have been organised for students. These reports should be considered by the Student Experience Committee.

Review Personal Tutor training to ensure that Tutors are equipped to sensitively handle student wellbeing issues, and assess the possibility of incorporating Mental Health First Aider training into this provision.

5) Balancing workload and avoiding timetabling clashes

Numerous comments across different departments stated that the workload of Imperial students jeopardises the development of a healthy work-life balance and results in a detrimental effect on mental health and wellbeing. This became even more apparent during a year spent in isolation.

“The workload is really massive. If you’re not caught up, you’re drowning. If you understand it fully, you’re lost. If you’re behind, it really takes a lot of effort and time to catch up. Mostly I just left problem sheets until the end of term. The culture of working constantly is pretty toxic...There’s just so much content to work through that I feel like I never relax. This is great because we learn an insane amount of maths in a short time, but it does take a toll on your old mental health.” – Mathematics

“I feel that the anxiety and stress associated with studying in a pandemic were not fully understood and considered. When the course was already difficult, not having the usual means of disconnecting every once in a while, and not being able to socialise as much can impact a student greatly and that should have been accounted for more than it seemed to have been. We are growing tougher, but I don’t feel that we deserved to be stretched this much”. – Bioengineering

Timetabling needs to be done with care, and with particular attention paid to avoiding overlapping deadlines for coursework submission. These deadlines should be posted clearly on an online platform; mediums include CATE and Blackboard.

Additionally, overworking has been branded into Imperial's culture.

"Work is definitely the number one priority before mental health." - Civil Engineering

As a result, it is important for the **entire College community to make a combined effort to dismantle the misconception that working to the point of exhaustion and ill health is the standard that should be set for students, and that taking the time to prioritise one's wellbeing will come at the detriment of academic success.** On the contrary, wellbeing should be portrayed as an investment into productivity and effectiveness that will help high-achieving students accomplish their goals.

To accomplish this, improving the visibility of the recommended number of private study hours for each module (that is developed in collaboration with faculty and older students) can help current students hold their expectations within a reasonable standard and plan their work, leisure, and self-maintenance into their days. This could be accomplished by publishing these recommendations on orientation PowerPoint slides and on course module descriptions on Blackboard. Holding and promoting departmental workshops about time-management and stress can then further help students develop strategies for their own success. Balancing the weighting of major pieces of coursework and exams can also help to relieve some pressure from students.

Recommendation:

Undertake a 'workload audit' across Departments, prioritising those where overwork is frequently reported as a concern in the NSS. This audit should involve independent academics who can assess whether the designated number of study hours associated with key pieces of work are realistic.

6) Improving mental health support

Whilst Imperial College does provide a full-time counselling and mental health advisory service, these services are often overbooked and overburdened, leaving students to fend for themselves. There is also still a long way to go in tackling the fear of some students that identifying and seeking help for mental health problems will lead to discrimination.

"I found the college mental health services to be lacking, with long waiting times and limited services offered. This appeared to be due to understaffing/funding." – Mechanical Engineering

Additionally, some students were met with a lack of empathy and understanding when asking for help.

"On a number of occasions, the welfare support provided has been absolutely terrible, and detrimental to my welfare [...]. I have left meetings with senior members of the welfare team feeling suicidal because of how I have been talked to, and ended up being referred to therapy in order to cope with what had been said to me. [...] I have been threatened with a fitness to practice assessment [...], based on having asked a trusted member of staff for support, because apparently, I 'should not talk about my mental health to anyone other than healthcare professionals looking after me, as I might make other people feel uncomfortable.' [...] I was further upset by the hypocrisy of the medical school tweeting, on World Mental Health Day, that if you're struggling you should reach out to someone, such as

a trusted member of staff - I had done exactly that and been stigmatised and threatened as a result.” - Medicine

Fortunately, students who did manage to gain access to College’s support services found that their quality of life was improved; additionally, many students were met with the level of care and concern from staff that their challenges deserved.

“Personally, I have had a good experience at Imperial. I have learnt all of the skills to make me a good doctor and was supported extremely well by my personal tutor through a difficult time.” – Medicine

It is important to address the **disparity that students experience in the College’s provision of wellbeing support** and ensure that students facing mental health issues are met with empathy.

Finally, more funding is needed for College’s counselling service to reduce waiting times. This funding should go towards increasing the number of full-time counsellors in the service. This will be especially important coming out of the pandemic as a year spent in isolation and hypervigilance around a prevalent pathogen will lead to an increase in the prevalence of trauma, eating disorders, anxiety, and other mental health conditions in the student population.

Recommendation:

Implement a process for active monitoring of the average waiting times for Counselling Service appointments, ensuring these numbers are reported regularly to the Student Experience Committee. Develop an action plan for reducing the average waiting time.

2. Recommendations for departments

ICU has worked with the departmental academic and wellbeing representatives to help them develop tailor-made recommendations for their courses based on the NSS scores and free text comments received. The representatives have provided 3-7 recommendations for their departments and are encouraged to present them to the departmental staff in various staff-student meetings. ICU will provide support throughout the year to help the reps keep track and monitor the implementation of the suggested recommendations.

In comparison with last year, the issues arising in departments are widely spread, which reflect that the recommendations are very specific to the departments and focus on various aspects, including those where the College received high NSS scores. The most identified problems are assessment and feedback concerns (included in 10 departmental reports) and the lack of mental health support (8). Even though they faced similar problems, the recommendations will vary across all departments. Besides the reoccurring issues, new issues are identified especially during COVID times. For example, students would like to see more social events happening within departments to rebuild the student community (4). Some students are worried about their future career and they wish to have more departmental specific career support (3). Therefore, we have provided a set of recommendations for all departments for student’s general concerns. All of the listed recommendations reflect the six general themes listed in the College recommendation. It is

also worthwhile to discuss with the student representatives during SSCs/SSLGs to get a comprehensive understanding of student’s concerns in an individual department.

3. Recommendations for Imperial College Union

One of the questions in the NSS asks about the performance of the relevant students’ union, specifically if the students believe the Union is effective at representing their academic interests. This year, ICU scored 57.7% (+3.4pp), which placed us in the 17th of all higher education institution (HEI) unions and the 5th most satisfied Student Union in the Russell Group. This question has had a lower College-wide agreement rate than any of the other areas in the NSS, which reflects a similar trend across all HEIs.

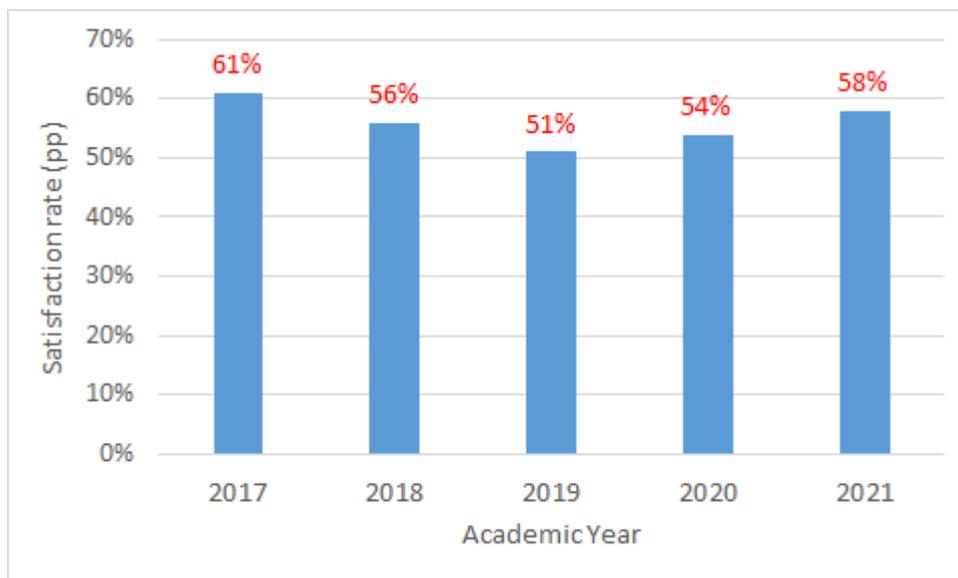


Figure 1: The percentage of final year Imperial students who answered “Definitely Agree” or “Mostly Agree” to the NSS question about the students’ union in years 2017-2021.

We concluded our strategic review of the ICU in May 2021 and we have published our 2021-23 *Back-to-Basics* strategy which outlines the core aims and clearly articulates how we plan to deliver impact for students. We have clearly defined our values in clear behavioural terms, to make sure they shape all ICU’s work and how we act. Our mission is to make a positive impact on the experiences and outcomes of all students from all backgrounds. We have taken a holistic approach to measuring our performance across all areas of our strategy. We welcome all students to monitor our progress over time to ensure the Union is developing sustainably and aligned with the wider institution. We will be working with the senior staff to ensure we follow the strategic plan and consult student’s feedback regularly.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Nathalie, the Deputy President (Welfare), as well as Cat and Helena from the Union’s student representation team for their help in writing this response. I would also like to thank our departmental academic and wellbeing representatives who have helped to frame many of our recommendations. We look forward to partnering with the College to embed these recommendations to bring a positive change for students.