

undergraduate student experience report 2014

foreword from the UG Education Officer

As a Union that represents all of our students, we believe it is our role and our duty to highlight the challenges facing our members. This report focuses on five such areas for undergraduates, based upon the result of the National Student Survey 2014, and complemented by the Union's own research. In 2014, we are asking the University to address Course Organisation, solve Hidden Course Costs, remove Equality Gaps, fix Feedback and improve Joint Honours and Year Abroad courses.

The National Student Survey (NSS) has become an integral part of higher education in the UK. It is always important that, despite its flaws, we remember that the NSS is a key indicator of students' opinions. As a Union, whilst we want the University's NSS score to be as high as possible, this should not come at the expense of a holistic approach to improving student education.

Our key mission must always be to focus on our students having the best experience possible, in every way and at every level, whilst at UEA. The University should always seek to make improvements to the educational experience of our members, regardless of NSS considerations. If they are successful in doing so, an NSS rise will be a by-product and reflection of these improvements. The University, though, should always be seeking integral, important and lasting educational change, rather than a play for a short-term fix, a few more points and a superficial rankings rise.



There are some fantastic results here to celebrate! It is clear that many of our members love their UEA educational experience, in all sorts of ways. However, they are also telling us how the experience can be improved. This is borne out in what students are asking for by this time next year. In many areas, whilst being constantly reminded that changes take time to be rolled out and have an impact, we cannot afford to wait on new initiatives and sit back, simply to be overtaken by more and more of our competitors. This is the beginning of a conversation over the coming year, and we must look forward to working with the University in thinking of new ways to enhance the educational experience at UEA and acting now, for the benefit of all students.

connor rand
undergraduate education officer

five big issues

1 Organisation & Management

2 Learning Resources

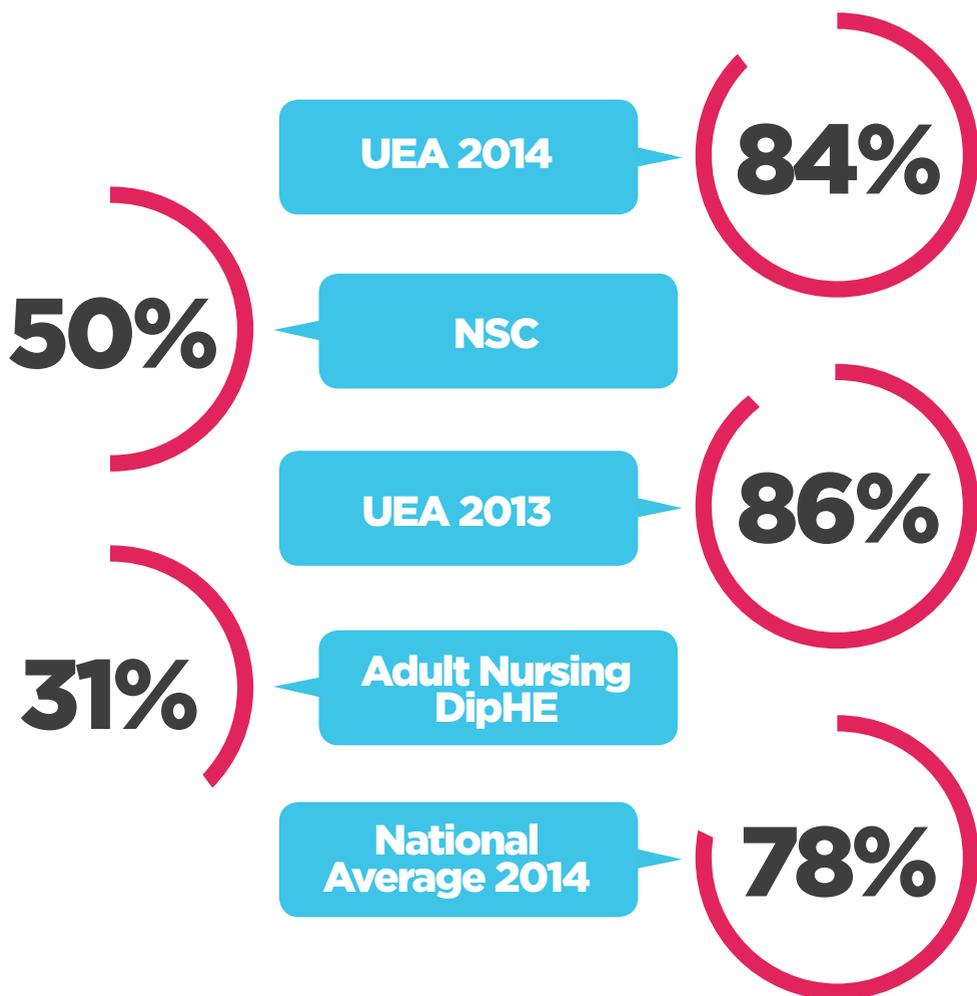
3 Equality

4 Assessment & Feedback

**5 Advice & Study Choices
Joint Honours & Year Abroad**

1

Organisation & Management



"Lecturers often do not provide the 10-minute break between lectures. This can be very difficult if you are a student with a disability or a person who has difficulty concentrating, as you are unable to get the most out of the lecture."

RSC

"Lectures are quite spread out in 2nd/3rd year, for example 8 hours across 3 days (or 2 non-consecutive days) and quite often when there are extra lectures, they are on a day when we are not already in university. This makes it quite difficult to hold down a part-time job. A job is essential when you don't get a full student loan!"

RSC

"Timetables are not great when you are a mature student with sole responsibility for a child, plus living a long way from the university. Being required in for 1/2 hour lectures over a few days can be troublesome. Also, when finishing at 5 p.m. and the lectures overrun causes me great stress as I need to be back to collect my child from day care in another town by a fixed time. It would be better if morning lectures started early and finished on the hour and afternoon lectures finished 10 minutes early for students in my position"

SWK

"...some of the ways in which we were timetabled was not favourable. For example, no breaks, room changes between two different modules (normally between a chemistry and biology module) that was sometimes impossible to get to in the given time and general timetabling between biology and chemistry modules (5-hour gaps)... Many struggled. It would be great if the timetabling of this course was balanced and paid attention to in terms of rooms, etc."

CHE

"The annual planner for vacations was changed with no prior notice or discussion with our cohort meaning that in 8 months there was no break and no defined split between modules as they felt as if they overlapped."

NSC

"In module 5 (Sept to Feb) we had 3 months of full-time shift work practice outcomes to meet, to produce a dissertation in 4 months and to produce 3000 words written reflections. I worked about 60 hours per week, I worked through the holidays and still there is so much I don't know. This has put an enormous strain on my family ... There has got to be a better way"

NSC

"Sometimes lessons have been changed without clear notification. Leading us being in classrooms when we have not needed to be or having to go and find lecturers as no one has turned up, because the schedules have been changed..."

NSC

1

The organisation of a course can have an enormous effect on a student's education, welfare and general life satisfaction. We believe that every student deserves their course to be a run in a proficient way that enables them to learn and develop and prevents unnecessary stress and difficulty.

NSC

Across UEA, many schools and courses are well organised, but some have particular issues. The Union is especially concerned for students on NSC (now HSC) courses, which continued their widespread low scores on the organisation and management section of the National Student Survey (Questions 13-15) There was no change from 2013. More importantly, the low scores do not appear to be focussed in one or two courses, but are spread across the school. Student dissatisfaction is even stronger amongst women in NSC. This is not solely about students with caring responsibilities – if it was, the NSS would be unlikely to show such a low score for young female students.

Timetabling

In a Union survey run during Week Three of the Autumn Semester, 20% of respondents said that they found out the details of their timetable less than one week before teaching started! Students told us that this makes it very difficult to sort out part time jobs and to arrange childcare. Students also expressed frustration with big gaps between teaching on the same day, particularly when travelling long distances into campus. One student said that if teaching was grouped together they "would waste less time/money travelling to and from Uni and on food ... a 7 hour gap is just a bit too much." At the other extreme, some students had almost all their teaching packed into one or two days, such as one with six hours on Monday, but only one on Tuesday and Wednesday.

Changes and Communication

Students also told us how useful it is to have the timetable on a mobile phone. However, several said that in the second week of the semester, they were still waiting for the timetable to be finalised so that it can be linked to phones. One student told us that their timetable had never even made it onto eVision. Meanwhile, some students experienced last minute changes to their timetable – one part-time student told us that they had been required to miss their teaching since the session had changed last minute and they had already arranged work cover.

My experience of Organisation

Emma Reason, Health Sciences

I'm a Jan 13 adult nursing student, who has enjoyed my first two years of my training. For the majority of the time everything has been straightforward and I have had amazing, different learning opportunities. However during my placements some of the documentation is confusing for both the students and the mentors. There has been problems when working out who is responsible for each bit of the documentation, how to complete the Assessment of Practice document and the Skills Booklet, whether each skill needs to have a comment, and who has to write these comments.

I think a number of simple steps could help address this confusion. The nurses who are student mentors need regular updates for the paperwork (as often as it changes) and access to a copy of the example paper work showing how it needs to be completed. Students should also have time to look through the paperwork with the module leads and discuss the learning outcomes and other documentation. Finally, when it comes to the Skills Booklet, it would help to have a similar session to that with the rest of paperwork to ensure it is properly understood, and there should also be a contact who understands both the documents for the students and mentors.

Alex Ocampo, Health Sciences

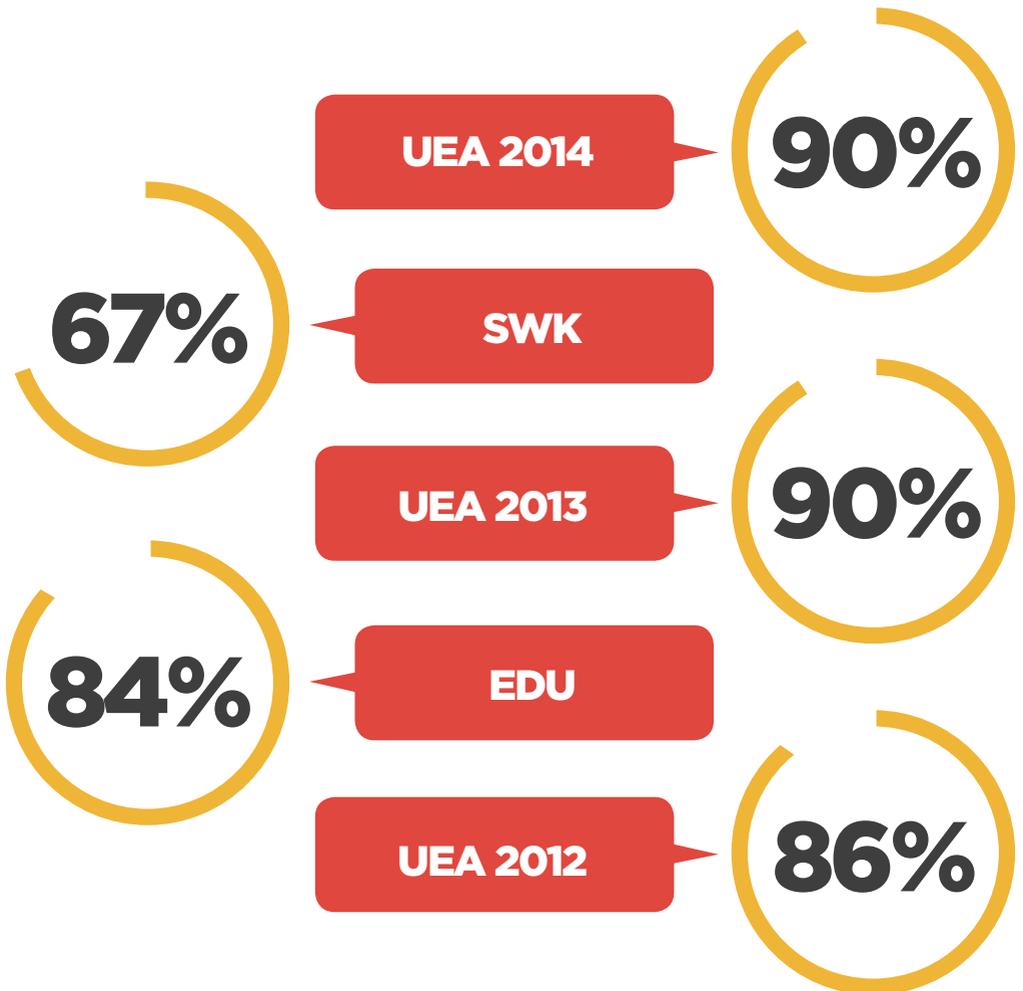
Nursing is a hard course as it is. You are still at University when most students have gone home. You have the commitment of long shifts, academic work, professionalism as well as trying to maintain a social and family life. It can be hard for nursing students to feel truly integrated with the rest of the university and feel supported. We shouldn't have to worry about the organisation of our course. I'd like to see nursing improve with a transparent placement allocation system, consistent timetabling and a uniform approach to assessment and feedback. It'd also help to have a more objective assessment of nursing attributes, and a greater acknowledgement of the importance of the student experience.

For 2015, UEA students are asking for

- 1. All student timetables to be released at least two weeks before the beginning of teaching in each semester.**
- 2. Student representation on University committees which address issues of timetabling, including the Timetabling Working Group.**
- 3. A coherent and full plan, agreed with HSC student representatives, to solve the organisational problems on nursing courses.**

2

Learning Resources



"Key texts were not available in a large enough quantity to satisfy the number of people on a module. Some were not electronically available meaning 20 or so students were sharing 3 or 4 books."

EDU

"Bad lecture rooms. Learning about positive learning environments in terrible no natural light box rooms!"

EDU

"We have had some of the worst classrooms on campus, and the poor learning environments have at times, negatively impacted on my learning. I think more effort should be made to ensure students are in the buildings which correspond to their degree subjects, or at least that the classrooms are rotated so the same students don't always get the poor learning environments."

EDU

"The library is also not big enough, with not enough resources whether that is books, spaces or plugs for all the students who want to use it."

PSI

"Hardly any computers free, very disorganised timetabling and notification systems."

CHE

"Sometimes, the library is so crowded."

ECO

"The timetable sometimes allocated poor rooms, making it hard or staff to utilise it well."

MTH

"Poorly equipped rooms, mainly smaller rooms for example. Lack of seating in lectures."

MTH

2

Current undergraduates are paying £9,000 per year for their education, a figure close to the average for a private secondary school education. In this environment, students are increasingly asking how their fees are reflected in provided resources.

Resources

UEA performs well in the learning resources section of the NSS, but there are one or two schools within each faculty with potentially concerning results. For instance, in EDU dissatisfaction is shared by both Education Studies and by Physical Education students. Students were frustrated with their facilities, particularly small teaching rooms such as those in Congregation Hall. It is misleading to show off the newest teaching spaces to applicants on an open day, and then to provide students with the bulk of their seminars in the Chancellor's Drive Annexe or in Congregation Hall.

Hidden Course Costs

Despite higher fees, students are required to bear the cost of many essential aspects of their teaching. Many students are required to spend significant sums on necessary components of their education, or are prevented from minimising such costs by lack of advance warning and poor communication.

In Week Two of the Autumn Semester, we asked students what costs they had incurred in the year so far. One student told us that they had to spend over £100 in Waterstones on brand new books because their lecturer told them immediately prior to teaching commencing that it was urgent to get the textbooks, meaning that online delivery would take too long. We heard from a literature student who told us that the library only has two copies of each novel, meaning that if a student takes three modules each semester, the costs of a new novel each week soon begin to mount up. In Law, one student has had to spend over £400 on textbooks. Students are also having to find the money for medical equipment, required injections (£60) and DBS checks (£45).

The Union believes that all students should have the opportunity to make the most of their education regardless of financial resources.

My experience of Learning Resources



**Amber-Jane Thurlow,
International Development**

In my experience students are the agents of change. If there is an issue that the majority of the student cohort agree needs to be changed then after some persistence it can be! In my school of International Development there is talk of having the dissertation deadline moved from January to March.

I would like to see a UEA remote desktop at home, so we can use the programmes that we currently only have access to use on campus. It makes a lot of sense to me to be able to develop your skills at home and not being limited to using them in the library.

For 2015, UEA students are asking for

- 1. A printing allowance for all students.**
- 2. Publication on the UEA website of estimated student living costs, based on robust data and including costs of course material.**
- 3. Students to be notified of a single key text for the module at least two weeks before teaching begins.**
- 4. A plan to refurbish older areas of campus, most of all Congregation Hall.**

3

Timetabling in BIO



INTERNATIONAL

67%

90%

HOME



MATURE

60%

90%

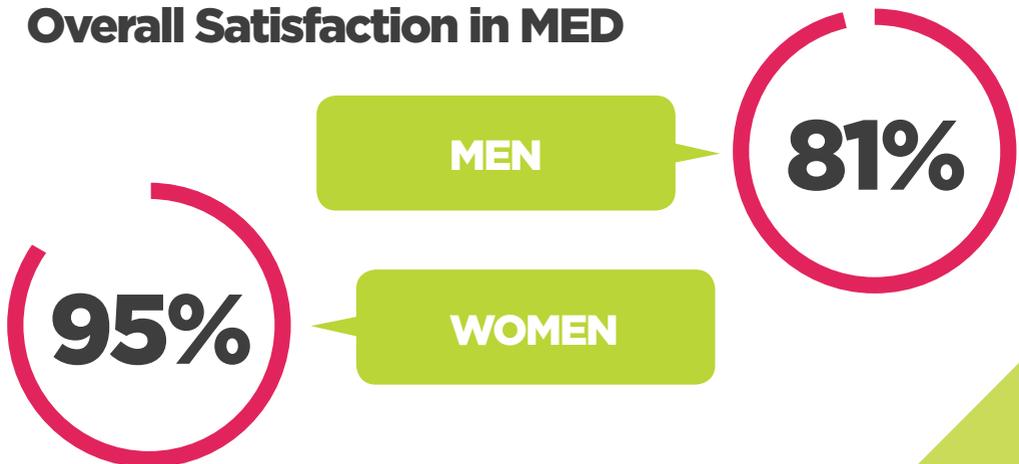
YOUNG (U21)

Equality: Watch The Gap

Personal Development in CMP



Overall Satisfaction in MED



3

The Union believes that all our students have a right to access the best of UEA, and that any variation in student satisfaction or in assessment performance is a matter of concern and should be investigated urgently. The National Student Survey revealed the following gaps which we believe the University should investigate further.

Timetabling

International students in several SCI schools (BIO, CMP, PHA) consistently scored NSS Q13 (timetabling) lower than UK students. This difference also extended to Q15 (Course Organisation) for CMP and PHA. This gap was not present in SSF, suggesting that the particular demands of science timetables are causing problems for international students. There was also a large difference between mature and young students over satisfaction with timetabling (for instance, a gap of -30 p.p. in BIO). A similar result was seen for RSC (-19 p.p.) suggesting that the timetabling of teaching in science-related subjects is causing particular issues for mature students.

Personal Development

In CMP in particular, there was a large gap between international and UK students for Q20 ('My communication skills have improved'.) This was a common trend across SCI, but in CMP the gap was especially large. There was again a marked difference with SSF, where international students score Q20 more highly than UK students. This could reflect the language skills of the students on entry, but it would be worth investigating whether SSF offer particularly good support which SCI could learn from.

The University's own published equality report shows a stark difference between the finals results of international students and UK students. In 2010/11, 3% of white students left UEA with a third class degree. For Chinese students, the figure was 11%. In the same year, 13% of white students received a first class degree, but only 3% of black students.

MED

In MED, female students were more satisfied than male students (+14 overall for 2014). This is not limited to 2014 – there was an average gap of +9.2 p.p. over the past six years. In particular, women have been more positive than men regarding timetabling for five of the past six years (with an average +9.5 p.p. difference). MED also displayed a gap between white and BME students across the majority of NSS questions, culminating in a -15 p.p. difference in overall satisfaction. Dissatisfaction was particularly acute for Assessment and Feedback section, as well as for Academic Support.

My experience as an International Student



Abdul-Razak Yakubu, International Development

As an international student and a class representative, I have received repeated complaints from fellow international students, mostly from Asian regions (especially students in the Business School), on the speed of lecturing, as this poses a problem for the ease in their comprehension of what is being taught. Another concern is the fact that, some of us do not have an academic background related to postgraduate courses, therefore, assignments come too early, which is difficult.

To solve the above, lecturers can reduce the pace of lecturing to enable students who do not have English as their first language to understand the lecture. Also, consideration should be given during lectures to students who are now learning a new discipline on the postgraduate level by adopting teaching strategies that would help them get full grasps of the discipline before the assignments are required from them.

For 2015, UEA students are asking for

- 1. The University to produce a report on the International Student Experience at UEA, looking into areas where international students face particular challenges and establishing how these can be addressed.**
- 2. The full consideration of student needs in timetabling. Students to be represented on the Timetabling Working Group, and University committees responsible for timetabling to take steps to ensure that they hear from part-time students, mature students and international students.**
- 3. The University to achieve a silver Athena SWAN institutional award.**

4

Assessment and feedback

Q7

41%

HIS

MED

Q9

38%

63%

UEA

66%

69%

NATIONAL

67%

"Coursework feedback is too long, should be a week to 2 weeks not 4 or 5 weeks later."

CHE

"The administration process for getting feedback for essays was far too slow, and feedback was not received within a useful time frame (i.e., before another essay for the same module was due in)."

HIS

"The HUB system for coursework submission is terrible with unhelpful people and slow responses times characteristic."

ENV

"At times, coursework feedback has taken far too long, and when it has (finally) arrived, the comments were either not detailed or illegible. That said, at other times coursework feedback has been prompt and very detailed; the problem lies in the consistency."

LAW

"The main problem for me is the lack of detail in feedback."

NBS

"Feedback is sometimes slow and often not detailed. Sometimes I feel as though I struggle to see the overall outcome of some topics, as they seem to drift into nothing and then won't be examined or put into coursework."

CHE

"The feedback on some of my coursework was unclear."

NBS

"When I get the work back there is no direction on how to improve or the feedback was given back too close to another deadline to allow me to improve."

HIS

"There was never any exam feedback. How I am supposed to know how to do better the following summer?"

LAW

"We don't get feedback following exams, they make up a large part of what we're assessed on, and lengthy feedback on exams would be really beneficial."

ENV

"Never had individual exam feedback. This would have helped figure out where the marks are being lost."

CHE

4

Assessment and Feedback has swiftly become a more pressing issue at UEA Overall satisfaction with UEA sits 8th out of 203 for all UK HEIs but 111th for the assessment and feedback category and 146th out of 203 for promptness of feedback.

Feedback Delays

In the 2013 Student Experience Survey students ranked feedback as the 4th most important factor to improving the student experience. The report also highlighted the perception of late feedback as one of the few areas for concern in the institution. In 2013, upon receiving the 2013 Union Student Experience Report the University made a commitment to explore measures to ensure feedback was returned in timely manner.

Feedback Quality

Student frustration with feedback is wider than just concern with turnaround times. Although several schools have produced low results for Q7, the majority of these show higher results on the other questions for the feedback and assessment section. However, there are exceptions in DEV and MED, and amongst SCI. Whilst in HUM, Q7 results are well below Q8 and Q9, in SCI the low scores are more evenly spread across the whole Assessment and Feedback section. All seven SCI schools fall between 57% and 71% for Q9. The difference between Q7 and Q9 suggests that there is a particular issue with the quality of feedback. In HUM, students appear frustrated with the timeliness of feedback, whilst in SCI there seem to be more concern about its actual usefulness.

Exam Feedback

Examination feedback is another area where students would welcome improvement on the current practice. Whilst generic feedback is now provided to students there are varied systems to negotiate before students can receive this and there are reports of it arriving too late to inform future work. As part of the Union's "what if" consultation students from a range of subjects including Law, Medicine and Computer Science raised the quality, consistency, timeliness, usefulness and accessibility of exam feedback.

The Union believes that good quality feedback is not an aspirational goal, but a fundamental criterion of effective education. UEA's approach in the year ahead should be to focus on nurturing excellent feedback that helps students to develop in their fields of study, not merely to look for short term NSS fixes.

My experience of Assessment and Feedback



Connor Rand, UG Education Officer, History

On one of my modules I had two major deadlines three weeks apart, on related topics. Unfortunately the first piece was not returned by the time the second piece had to be in and so I did not have the opportunity to use my feedback to learn, develop and inform my work going forward.

Additionally, as a result of not being set any formative assignments during my degree and not having personal feedback on my exams, I never had the opportunity to develop as a learner in the way I should have done.

For 2015, UEA students are asking for

- 1. UEA to implement the National Union of Students Assessment and Feedback Benchmarking Tool.**
- 2. All schools to provide generalised examination feedback.**
- 3. A pilot programme for individualised examination feedback, to explore how individualised exam feedback could be implemented more generally.**

5

Advice and Study Choices: Joint Honours & Year Abroad

NSS Q12

SINGLE HONOURS
COURSES

88%

79%

YEAR ABROAD OR
A COMBINATION OF
SUBJECTS

HIS

HISTORY (SINGLE
HONOURS)

87%

76%

HISTORY &
POLITICS COURSE

"I am working across two departments and communication between them could improve."

ART

"Joint Honours courses are not very well run. Numerous times events (for example, lectures on module choices) for the courses were on at the same time... On my course, initially there were mostly Joint Honours students, but a substantial amount of those people dropped one subject or the other, or expressed a desire to drop one to a member of staff."

PHI

"Perhaps as the two schools of art history and literature are so run so differently sometimes it has felt difficult to keep a balance between the two."

ART

"Studying 3 very different subjects equally means it is very difficult to get advice for example when choosing modules. There isn't anybody who knows about all of the modules we have the option of taking. Same problem applies to your personal adviser. It's also hard because you have to be as good in all of your modules as the people who do the subject alone, and who have often done modules before that relate to what you are learning, so I think Joint Honours degrees involve quite a lot more work."

ECO

"I was given the amazing opportunity to study abroad in Miami for a semester and the staff at UEA were very helpful and supportive."

CHE

"The organisation on FIU's part for the semester abroad in Miami was atrocious especially with the online module. Though promised, the exams were going to be at the end of the exam period so we could focus on our studies at FIU but once we returned from Miami, they were two weeks after our return, which was not long enough to revise all the necessary information."

CHE

"The study abroad office were actively unhelpful when it came to organising our year abroad. It is a shame that an excellent law school is let down by the wider university administration systems."

LAW

"Having the opportunity to take part in a study Year Abroad was fantastic; any and every student should have that opportunity, and as many as possible should take it up it's definitely worth it."

LAW

5

Students on courses with a year abroad or a year in industry speak highly of amazing opportunities to broaden their education, but also face extra challenges associated with their courses. Joint Honours students, a particular Union concern in the 2013 Student Experience Report, face similar issues. The NSS 2014 showed that one particular challenge facing these students is greater difficulty with making well informed study choices.

Joint Honours Courses

Students on joint honours courses speak positively of the opportunity to study subjects in interesting and valuable combinations. However, our students also face problems when there is confusion between schools regarding timetabling, extenuating circumstances, or support from personal advisors.

Students often find that their advisor only understands part of their course. This issue becomes more acute if a student chooses to focus their studies in modules offered by the school of which their advisor is not a member. This means that Joint Honours students may miss out on the benefits of having an advisor who knows the student's area of study and can give informed advice and encouragement about future options, as well as being in a better position to provide the student with a reference.

Year Abroad

NSS comments shed light on the student experience of the year abroad, revealing a combination of brilliant educational and developmental opportunities, whilst at times also showing experiences of poor communication and administration. Students often face difficulties in communicating with UEA whilst they are on their year abroad, whether this be for sorting out 4th year options, or contacting student support services. A greater focus on administrative support for year abroad students can ensure that UEA students are enabled to take full advantages of these incredible opportunities.

UEA students value the combinations of subjects offered by the University, and frequently reference the wide range of modules and the opportunities for study abroad as amongst the best features of UEA! Ironing out administrative issues and communication problems can make a huge difference to students, and enable them to make the most of their interesting subject combinations.

My experience of Joint Honours and Year Abroad



Sam Lane, Biological Sciences with a Year in North America

While my study abroad was great and I wouldn't change anything some more support from the Study Abroad Office would have been much appreciated. Once abroad I had some module challenges and when I emailed the Office to ask what my specifications were, they never replied and I was left in the dark not knowing if my choices would have been approved, a problem

other students faced. While ERASMUS students get extra money for their studies, students going elsewhere get a marginal increase in maintenance loan when realistically their costs are often much more.

On many occasions, friends of mine felt that the Office were poorly informed and unwilling to provide much help. It made the pre-departure process significantly more stressful. If communication with the Study Abroad Office could change, it would make the year abroad even better.



Emily Kitching, Environmental Geography and International Development

My course is great because you get to know loads of people as you are in two different schools but you also become really close to fellow EGIDs. However, one aspect of my course that I have found problems with is the lack of communication between ENV and DEV, meaning that I have been taught topics twice or that my advisor sometimes can't help me with issues that I have faced because

they do not know much about the other school.

Students don't quite fit in with either school at times and face issues that other students may not, for example differences in coursework style and grading. It would be better if more support was given to all students on joint honours programmes across the university.

For 2015, UEA students are asking for

- 1. SSLCs to take time to consider the specific issues facing Joint Honours students.**
- 2. UEA to commit to enhancing Joint Honours courses and ensuring that their unique educational value is protected.**
- 3. Joint Honours students to be assigned Academic Advisors who have experience of the entirety of their course or, alternatively, for Joint Honours students to have two Academic Advisors, with whom they meet jointly at least once per academic year.**

For 2015, UEA students are asking for:

- All student timetables to be released at least two weeks before the beginning of a student's course.
- Student representation on University committees which address issues of timetabling, including the Timetabling Working Group.
- A coherent and full plan, agreed with HSC student representatives, to solve the organisational problems on nursing courses.
- A printing allowance for all students.
- Publication on UEA's website of estimated student living costs, based on robust data and including costs of course material.
- Students to be notified of a single key text for the module at least two weeks before teaching begins.
- A plan to refurbish older areas of campus, most of all Congregation Hall.
- The University to produce a report on the International Student Experience at UEA, looking into areas where international students face particular challenges and establishing how these can be addressed.
- The full consideration of student needs in timetabling. Students to be represented on the Timetabling Working Group, and University committees responsible for timetabling to take steps to ensure that they hear from part-time students, mature students and international students.
- The University to achieve a silver Athena SWAN institutional award.
- UEA to implement the National Union of Students Assessment and Feedback Benchmarking Tool.
- All schools to provide generalised examination feedback.
- A pilot programme for individualised examination feedback, to explore how individualised exam feedback could be implemented more generally.
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- UEA to commit to enhancing Joint Honours courses and ensuring that their unique educational value is protected.
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MORE INFORMATION

To find out more about any of the issues raised in this year's report, please visit our website (ueastudent.com). You can also discover more about what UEA students are saying by taking a look at the results of our weekly Sixty Second Surveys!