**DIVISIONAL BOARDS, CONTINUING EDUCATION BOARD,**

**Communication from Graduate Panel: Postgraduate taught student matters**

Education Committee Circulars Ref **19**-16/17

Applicable to: PGT courses

Circulation: divisions, departments, faculties

**Action required**

*Divisions and departments/faculties are asked to* ***note*** *a change to policy in respect of the provision of assessment feedback and to* ***give serious consideration*** *to providing maximum feedback on early summative assessments, within the framework of the policy.*

*Departments/faculties are asked, ahead of the release of course handbooks for 2017-18, to* ***improve the level of detail provided*** *about assessment and feedback and articulate their practice clearly, including discussion on the links between formative and summative assessment.*

*Divisions are asked* ***to provide*** *templates for feedback on dissertations to assist departments in fulfilling the policy.*

*Divisions and departments/faculties are asked to* ***consider enhancements*** *to their feedback practice, including ensuring that the policy is fully implemented and that opportunities for other informal feedback mechanisms are included.*

*Divisions and departments/faculties are asked to* ***note*** *the template for the* Provision of information to graduate applicants *on websites (Annex B) that details the information that should be provided and to* ***consider*** *including more detailed information about course content.*

*Divisions and departments/faculties are asked to* ***note*** *OUSU’S* *‘Report on Postgraduate Taught (PGT) Course Satisfaction’ (Annex C) and the recommendations made, reflecting on practice in a broader range of areas of PGT provision.*

**1. Postgraduate taught student matters**

* 1. The current Education Committee policy on the provision of feedback to PGT students has been in place for three years[[1]](#footnote-1). Feedback received from PGT students via the Student Barometer and other mechanisms, such as OUSU’s *‘Report on Postgraduate Taught (PGT) Course Satisfaction’ (Annex C)*, indicate that a substantial proportion of students remain dissatisfied on some courses with the provision of feedback on both formative and summative assessment.
  2. In Michaelmas Term 2016 officers within Education Policy Support undertook a desk-based review of information in a selection of course handbooks to assess the extent to which departments were setting out clearly for PGT students the ways in which they were providing feedback. Some examples of good practice can be found and are shared with colleagues in Annex A, section 1.
  3. The review found that very few handbooks met the standard of information expected in the course handbook template[[2]](#footnote-2) with regards to feedback on both formative and summative assessment. The expectation is that handbooks will:
* set out the assessment strategy and structure of the course including the types and weighting of assessment for each part of the course;
* describe the opportunities offered for informal feedback;
* describe the opportunities offered for formative assessment;
* describe the opportunities offered for feedback on summative assessment.
  1. Graduate Panel considered the current policy on student feedback and agreed it should be strengthened in light of student comments. Examination boards are *strongly encouraged* to provide feedback on summative assessment undertaken prior to the final term of the course. The amended wording of the policy may be found at Annex A, sections 2 and 3. The new policy will come into immediate effect.
  2. Additionally, in Hilary Term 2017 Graduate Admissions undertook a review of 69 department websites to assess the overall navigation and attractiveness of each website; use of features such as social media and multimedia; information about academic content; information about current students and alumni; and information about applying. The review also assessed whether:
* information provided to applicants was consistent with the guidance issued to HE providers by the Competition and Markets Authority Guidance in March 2015[[3]](#footnote-3);
* websites provided sufficient detail to enable applicants to form realistic expectations of what each course offered (including contact hours and assessment methods);
* websites incorporated the latest technologies and reflected the latest online trends such as the increased use of embedded video content.
  1. The review found that in general sites performed well in categories that were considered the ‘core’ functions of a department website (e.g. details of current research activity, staff and students, as well as an overview of course content and key details of when and how to apply). Weaknesses were particularly prevalent where expectations in the sector have increased at high rates, such as in visual/multimedia content, careers information and student voice. More precise information could also be provided regarding course delivery and teaching methods. A template detailing the type of information that should be provided on department websites may be found at **Annex B**.
  2. Examples of good practice included the Oxford Internet Institute demonstrating a range of different methods of visual communication; the Nuffield Department of Medicine providing in-depth student research profiles and interviews and the Blavatnik School of Government showcasing alumni profiles and destinations.
  3. Whilst individual feedback from the website review will be provided to Divisions and departments/faculties directly from Graduate Admissions, it is recognised that course handbooks and websites normally contain similar information and are often updated within the same timeframe in preparation for a new admissions cycle. This joint communication from Education Policy Support and Graduate Admissions therefore clarifies, and provides details on how to improve, the information that should be provided by Divisions and departments/faculties across all published materials.
  4. In Trinity Term 2016, Graduate Panel received OUSU’s ‘Report on Postgraduate Taught (PGT) Course Satisfaction’ (Annex C), which provided an update to similar work undertaken by OUSU in 2011 and 2013. Whilst there had been an increase in satisfaction over this time, the report highlighted some areas of concern and made sixteen recommendations for improvements focussing on issues such as:
* the provision of feedback on both formative and summative assessment;
* the balance of assessment methods and timing;
* the clarity of information provided to both applicants and to on-course students, particularly for those not familiar with the UK university system;
* contact time and how to improve at least the perception of this;
* welfare and pastoral provision for PGT students.
  1. **Divisions and departments/faculties are asked to note the recommendations listed in OUSU’s report, particularly with regard to the provision of feedback and clarity of information provided to applicants and the required changes and recommended additions to the information provided across published materials and practice in these areas.** The actions requested of departments and faculties in this communication will substantially address some of the key concerns identified in OUSU’s report.

For further information contact Philippa O’Connor in Education Policy Support: [philippa.oconnor@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:philippa.oconnor@admin.ox.ac.uk)) and Paul Garside in Graduate Admissions: ([paul.garside@admin.ox.ac.uk](mailto:paul.garside@admin.ox.ac.uk)).

**Assessment Feedback**

***1.* Examples of good practice in course handbooks**

Of the course handbooks that were reviewed, the following demonstrate differing approaches of providing information about feedback to PGT students:

* [MSc Mathematical Modelling and Scientific Computing](https://www.maths.ox.ac.uk/system/files/attachments/MMSC_Handbook_2016.pdf);
* [MSc Global Health Science](https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk/access/content/group/f11eacd4-b2dc-4191-aa4b-43d0e0d7e1c8/2016-17/CORE/1617%20Handbook.%20Final%20version.pdf);
* [MSc Applied Statistics](http://www.stats.ox.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0020/14357/MSc_Handbook_2016.pdf);
* [PGCE Student Handbook](https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk/portal/site/:socsci:education:pgce:handbooks/page/home).

The course handbook for [MSc Clinical Embryology](https://weblearn.ox.ac.uk/access/content/group/f4bbcd09-7d4b-4ef3-90e0-7ad87f747fad/Course%20Hanbook%20_%20Examination%20Conventions/Course%20Handbook%202016_YEAR9.pdf) provides an example of how detail about formative feedback may be provided to students.

***2.* Revision t*o* the *Policy and guidance on postgraduate taught courses***

*(*[*http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/edc/policiesandguidance/pgpgtaughtcourses/7assessment/#d.en.222063*](http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/edc/policiesandguidance/pgpgtaughtcourses/7assessment/#d.en.222063)*)*

**§7. Assessment**

6. Feedback

(b) endeavour to provide feedback, via examination boards, on any elements of summative assessment which are undertaken prior to the final term of the course. This may include Trinity term assessments for 12-month courses. Supervisory bodies may direct examination boards to provide feedback in one of the following ways:

***3.* Revision t*o* the *Policy and guidance for examiners and others involved in University Examinations***

*(*[*http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/edc/policiesandguidance/pgexaminers/13feedbackandresits/*](http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/edc/policiesandguidance/pgexaminers/13feedbackandresits/)*)*

**§13. Feedback and Resits**

2. Feedback for taught graduate courses

(b) endeavour to provide feedback, via examination boards, on any elements of summative assessment which are undertaken prior to the final term of the course. This may include Trinity term assessments for 12-month courses. Supervisory bodies may direct examination boards to provide feedback in one of the following ways:

In accordance with both the [*Policy and Guidance on Postgraduate Taught Degrees*](https://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/edc/policiesandguidance/pgpgtaughtcourses/2admissions/) and the [*Policy and Guidance on Research Degrees*](https://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/edc/policiesandguidance/policyonresearchdegrees/section1admissions/), the University must ensure that information relating to postgraduate programmes is clear, accurate and of sufficient detail to enable applicants to make informed choices.

The following information should be provided to applicants on the **Graduate Admissions website**:

* Course structure and content (e.g. nature and type of qualification, course duration, pattern of teaching, learning and assessment, study and residence requirements);
* IT support/library facilities/experimental facilities available;
* Department/Faculty social facilities;
* Deadlines for receipt of applications;
* Steps applicants should take having identified a potential supervisor i.e. whether it is appropriate to enter into correspondence with the supervisor at this stage or not;
* Funding opportunities;
* Fees, living costs and additional costs (e.g. costs of any associated fieldwork, research trips, or other equipment costs)\*;
* List of accepting colleges\*;
* The criteria for assessment of applicants to the programme including the measures of academic ability (degree level etc.), English language requirements, other qualifications and/or experience required, and the supporting materials required\*.

\* *This information must not be duplicated on department websites.*

As a minimum, the following information should be provided to applicants on **department websites**:

* The name of the course director (for PGT courses);
* Supervisors’ research interests and/or projects (for PGR courses);
* The arrangements that will be put in place for supervising the graduate’s work as appropriate;
* The induction arrangements;
* The workspace provided;
* Provision of formal graduate skills training (for PGR courses);
* Opportunities for developing teaching skills (for PGR courses);
* Opportunities for work experience and internships;
* Department/Faculty arrangements for pastoral and welfare support;
* Specific requirements such as health clearance, immunisation, approval from the Academic Technology Approval Scheme (ATAS).

In addition to the information listed above, departments should also consider expanding upon the information provided to applicants on the Graduate Admissions website (e.g. by providing a more detailed list of the modules available on a taught course or detailing the arrangements for resits). However, to avoid providing conflicting information to applicants, details of the criteria for assessment, fees, additional costs, living costs and accepting colleges, should only be provided on the Graduate Admissions website.

The following information is also provided on centrally managed University websites:

* Visa requirements;
* University accommodation, and general information relating to college accommodation;
* Careers advice.

**Graduate Admissions**

**Hilary term 2017**

**OUSU report on Postgraduate Taught (PGT) course satisfaction**

**Trinity Term 2016**

**Summary**

1. In 2011, OUSU conducted a review of postgraduate taught (PGT) courses, using a survey and a series of focus groups. The University, working with OUSU, strengthened the required provision for PGT students; for instance, by adding a requirement that all PGT students should receive one piece of written feedback before completing any summative assessments. There has been a noticeable increase in satisfaction (as seen in the Student Barometer) since this new *Policy and Guidance*, and we welcome efforts by the University, divisions and departments to work to improve PGT courses.
2. However PGT students still demonstrate significantly poorer satisfaction than undergraduate or research students, and some areas (such as feedback, the balance of assessment methods, and contact time with academic staff) remain of concern. To review this, OUSU has considered results from the Student Barometer in recent years, conducted a survey of PGT students, and run a series of focus groups with students on PGT courses across divisions.
3. Based on the findings from the Student Barometer, our survey and the series of focus groups, we make 16 recommendations for improving the quality of the PGT courses on offer at the University – and importantly, for improving PGT students’ perception of these courses. The full set of recommendations are copied at the end of this report. Some are more specific than others, and some will be more relevant to certain departments than others. However, it is hoped that these will be considered as priorities in the medium term, given the strength of many PGT students’ concerns about their courses – some of which could be resolved without considerable time or resources.

**Background**

1. In 2010, Education Committee reviewed the University’s teaching provision model. As part of this review, OUSU ran a consultation with different groups of students to compile a student response, comprising a series of focus groups, a concurrent survey, and existing data (including from the Student Barometer). The results were brought to Education Committee’s Graduate Panel in Trinity Term 2011, in the form of OUSU’s ‘Response on Behalf of PGT Students to Oxford’s Review of its Teaching Model’ (the “2011 PGT Report”). The report highlighted a range of issues affecting PGT students, some of which were division-specific and some of which applied across the University.
2. Graduate Panel (and subsequently, Education Committee) received the 2011 PGT Report positively, and Graduate Panel noted that ‘it was important that faculties and departments were alerted to these concerns [raised in the report] and asked to address them’. The issues raised in the report remained under discussion at Graduate Panel, other University committees, and at divisional level.
3. In Trinity Term 2013, OUSU provided Graduate Panel with an update on progress with the 2011 Report’s areas of concern. This update focused on the issues of:

* Student engagement and representation
* Contact hours (and especially courses with significantly few such hours)
* Improving feedback, marking criteria and the methods and timing of assessment
* The need for more accurate information on PGT course websites, especially with respect to patterns of teaching, and patterns of work;
* The importance of careers advice and employability, and the potential for departments to use alumni to facilitate this

1. We remain concerned about several of these areas. This concern stems primarily from our interaction with students, and the results of the annual Student Barometer survey. In contrast, we are pleased with progress on student engagement and representation, as part of a partnership between the University and OUSU. This has been discussed at Education Committee’s Quality Assurance Subcommittee, and details are available in OUSU’s annual report on student representation (discussed at the Subcommittee in Hilary Term 2016, and available on request).
2. This review was therefore conducted to explore current PGT students’ satisfaction with their courses, and to explore which areas they felt required improvement. It is hoped that it will provide a detailed snapshot of students’ thoughts about their courses.

**Methodology**

1. The main methodology used for this review was a series of focus groups, mostly taking part in departments. Current course representatives were contacted to set up focus groups, with a request for them to find 3-10 current students from their department to take part in a 1-hour focus group about their experiences on their current course. A full list of focus groups, and the structure used for focus groups, is found in the Appendix.
2. It was recognised that these focus groups would not capture the views of all courses, and hence of all students. A survey was therefore constructed, asking similar questions to the discussion points in focus groups, and providing both a quantitative assessment of satisfaction, but also allowing free text responses to gather further qualitative data. The survey was sent to all PGT students in 10th week of Hilary Term 2016, with two follow-up emails also sent as reminders. It was completed by 481 students, or just over 10% of the student body. Respondents were from across divisions and fee statuses in approximately representative proportions. While this proportion is relatively low, it is hoped that particularly the free-text comments can supplement the rich data collected at the focus groups – and that it will collect the views of a body who tend to be less responsive to usual methods of communication (including by OUSU).
3. To supplement the results of the focus groups and survey, data from the Student Barometer were reviewed in relevant areas. The data reported here are the average satisfaction figures for students in 2013, 2014 and 2015 (that is, the current and two previous cohorts). One notable caveat of the Student Barometer is its timing. When students complete it in November or December, most PGT students will only just be starting their course – and will be unlikely to have completed any summative assessment. We return to this issue in the conclusions, but we believe that while useful, the validity of the Student Barometer for PGT students is limited as a result of this.
4. This report therefore covers the main areas discussed in the focus groups and survey, with some additional areas that became apparent in the discussions at focus groups.

**Feedback**

1. Feedback (especially on written work) was a major issue raised in the 2011 report. This seemed to be in two areas: a desire for more formative work, with feedback to help with the eventual completion of summative assessment; and greater feedback on that summative assessment, to help with improving on future assessments. OUSU welcomes the requirement introduced by the University following the 2011 report that all PGT students should have the opportunity to receive feedback on one piece of formative work before completing assessed work that will count towards their final grade.
2. However there is also anecdotal evidence that PGT students still do not feel satisfied with the amount of feedback they receive on their work, and do not feel confident that they understand what is expected from them in their summative assessment. This is evident from results in the Student Barometer, and was highlighted by OUSU in the Student Written Submission for the Higher Education Review.
3. In the Student Barometer, there are two questions about the detail of feedback received, and the promptness of receiving this feedback. The caveat about the timing of the Student Barometer should be repeated, but it is clear from the results that satisfaction is fairly low in these areas compared to other aspects of academic provision. The average satisfaction was 81% on the detail of feedback, and 85% on its promptness; however, there are a considerable number of courses with satisfaction between 60 and 80% (and some, which is concerning, being below 50%). This includes some of the courses where focus groups took place (for example, the MBA has an average satisfaction with the detail of feedback of 66%; Sociology has an average of 62%).
4. The survey therefore asked five questions about formative feedback and assessment, in relation to satisfaction with: the promptness of feedback, the usefulness of feedback for understanding material on the course and for improving performance on summative assessment, and the quantity of formative assessment (be it sufficient, or excessive).
5. Responses are given in Table 1. Particularly noteworthy results are:

* 30% of students disagreed that feedback had been returned promptly
* Only 55% of students reported that formative feedback had been useful for their understanding of the material, and only 51% said it had been useful for summative assessment
* Only 16% of students reported that the amount of formative assessment had been excessive; in contrast, 21% felt that there had been insufficient formative assessment

1. These results were elucidated further in the free-text comments. Although some were positive (either about the amount of formative assessment, or the quality of feedback), most reflected on either the limited (or in some cases, absent) amount of formative assessment, the brevity of feedback provided on formative work, or the lack of help that this proved to be when completing summative assessment.

*Table 1 - Feedback*[[4]](#footnote-4)

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neither /nor | Agree | Strongly Agree | N/A |
| Feedback has been returned promptly | 9% | 21% | 15% | 35% | 16% | 4% |
| Feedback has been useful for understanding of material | 8% | 18% | 15% | 40% | 15% | 4% |
| Feedback helped to improve summative assessment | 11% | 18% | 14% | 33% | 18% | 6% |
| Amount of formative work has been sufficient | 6% | 16% | 22% | 40% | 12% | 4% |
| Amount of formative work was excessive | 17% | 42% | 19% | 11% | 6% | 5% |

1. On the issue of the amount of formative assessment provided, some comments either raise concerns about compliance with the current *Policy and guidance*, or at the very least, suggest that some departments are fulfilling the letter of the policy but not beyond this. Some quotes from the free-text comments that reflect this are:

*I received feedback on maybe 1/3 of the “formative” essays I submitted.*

*The formative assessment was not assessed at all! Promised feedback but still not received.*

*Every essay I complete for the duration of my course is marked in some way and there is literally no opportunity to practice (sic) on unassessed assignments. I find this bizarre. I did an undergraduate degree at Oxford and had an essay set every week; this is a taught Masters and suddenly there is no teaching.*

*One essay only to be assessed formatively. We were told that they could give us feedback on academic writing style only, not quality of content.*

*Against policy a minimum of one formative assessment elective essay was not required in my specific elective contributing to problems in summative assessment essays.*

*I’m a part time student and therefore don’t receive feedback outside of my assessments.*

*One piece was given a grade, in other cases we were told it was not possible to grade formative work.*

1. The quality of the feedback received, and how useful this was for completing summative assessments, was another key theme in free-text responses. Example quotes include:

*Feedback doesn’t give you any instructions how to improve, just what you did wrong.*

*Formative assessments are not returned in time to affect summative writing – they’re effective (sic) pointless.*

*Contradictory comments on the same piece of work are not infrequent and frankly bewildering.*

*When I have emailed questions for advice regarding my research proposal these have not been responded to. The feedback I received … was one sentence which was a question.*

*Overall, the formatives have been unhelpful in assisting with summative work and in some cases have been misleading.*

*More detailed written comments about the work would be appreciated… A feedback rubric might have helped.*

1. There were fewer comments about excessive formative work. However, some respondents took the opportunity to raise concerns about the amount of work required, questioning its pedagogical benefit; one example quote of this is:

*Formative assessments, whilst aiming to be helpful often create artificial stress and can distract from tasks that should take primacy such as dissertation work or – around Christmas – DPhil applications. The short time allowed to digest the information also leads to an exhausting string of all-nighters… To this extent they can be counter-productive.*

1. There were, however, some examples of good practice:

*One of my tutors for my option module uses a comprehensive feedback from which is excellent and allows one to understand both what has worked and what has not worked… but that tutor is a rarity in my experience.*

1. Given the continued concerns expressed in the survey and Student Barometer, feedback formed the basis for the first few questions in focus groups. Students were asked about the quantity, usefulness and relevance of formative assessment on their courses, and how useful this had been in completing summative assessments.
2. The focus groups revealed that while formative assessment was sufficient and useful on some courses, it was generally seen as insufficient. One student said that feedback on work had been “generally horrendous”, which was supported by those also present. As an example, they noted that they had completed a mock exam, but were then told that it was “not good practice” to then give the answers for that exam afterwards, questioning the purpose of the exercise. In another group, it was discussed how only having feedback on one written essay (that is, fulfilling only the minimum required by the *Policy and guidance*) was “ridiculous”, given that essays formed the main part of summative assessment, and as some students had considerably little experience of essay-writing.
3. The lack of feedback and guidance was particularly noted by students who had not studied in the UK (and particularly not in Oxford) before, or where they did not have an academic background. For instance, in a focus group in the Social Sciences, the practice in the UK for marks above 80 to be very rare was alluded to, and it was felt that this had not been sufficiently explained. In Medical Sciences, the range of backgrounds (for example, the prevalence of doctors or other clinicians) was cited as a need for more specific formative feedback. On a Social Sciences course, a student said:

*I feel there is a way to write an Oxford essay… some formula I try to get and I can’t work it out.*

1. In some courses, it was concerning that students felt they had not had an opportunity to complete formative assessment at all. This will be followed up by OUSU.
2. A particular comment that appeared in several focus groups was a clear inconsistency in the quantity of feedback provided, between modules or tutors. For example, in one Humanities focus group, students talked of having “some review drafts twice”, while “some not at all”, and that “some students don’t know that [having a draft read by a tutor] is an option”. There were similar comments to all of these in other focus groups. In one Social Sciences course, it was noted that students had to “push professors to get more than a short paragraph”. In a Medical Sciences focus group, a student noted that they had received two pieces of feedback from two tutors on one piece of work, but that these completely conflicted with each other.
3. The link between formative and summative assessments was also a common discussion point. For example, in a Medical Sciences focus group, a student commented about how laboratory reports were “pretty much useless” in their purpose of helping with the final dissertation, as feedback was specific to that report rather than being of general assistance. Similarly, in a focus group in Humanities, a student commented how they could not “gauge the relevance or understanding for exams”, given the insufficient amount of formative assessment, and therefore of feedback provided on that work.
4. It was also noted in several discussions that as the markers of formative and summative assessments were different, the feedback had unfortunately been of limited use given different marking criteria had seemed to be applied. This was particularly noticeable in interdisciplinary subjects, where those marking formative assessments were in entirely different disciplines to the topics that the first set of summative assessments were based on, making the benefit of the formative work limited.
5. There were, pleasingly, some examples of good practice. Students in one focus group spoke of how formative assessment had “helped [them] to hone in ideas”, especially as they “hadn’t written essays much before”. In another course, tutorials were cited as a particularly useful format for “rolling feedback”; several focus groups across divisions discussed how more tutorials, or even small seminars, would be of significant benefit.
6. Feedback is also discussed further with respect to assessment, and the amount of feedback received on summative work completed before the end of the course.
7. It was clear from the survey and focus groups that feedback remains the area of greatest concern for PGT students in the University. Based on the findings discussed before, we make three recommendations for improving the quality and quantity of feedback provided to students, although we encourage divisions to take away the concerns outlined here to consider if more can be done within departments and faculties to improve the mechanisms in place for providing students with more feedback.

**Recommendation 1: Departments, divisions and, where appropriate, the University should work to ensure first that the current *Policy and Guidance* on formative feedback is being adhered to, but moreover, that departments make considerable efforts to enhance the amount of formative feedback provided to PGT students.**

**Recommendation 2: The timing and amount of formative assessment should be considered in partnership with students, to ensure it is providing pedagogical benefit. Consideration should be given as to whether excessive formative assessment could be converted into *summative* assessments to alleviate concerns about its value.**

**Recommendation 3: More consideration should be given at the departmental level as to whether the format, content and feedback provided for formative assessments effectively matches the summative assessments that students on that course will complete, to ensure the assignments truly are *formative*.**

**Assessment**

1. There is clearly considerable thought put into the range of assessment methods used on PGT courses, and the timing of those assessment within the year. The *Policy and Guidance* also offers considerable flexibility on these methods and timing. That said, the issue of assessment on some courses remaining focused on examinations in the final term has been discussed recently at Quality Assurance Subcommittee, and remains a concern for many students on these courses. While course leaders may be better placed to judge the most pedagogically appropriate assessment methods, the importance of engaging students in the rationale behind assessment methods and timing is crucial. This is particularly relevant given that work based at undergraduate level has considered whether differences in outcomes based on gender, race or other factors may in part be alleviated by moving away from solely using final-year examinations.
2. Results from the Student Barometer support these concerns, demonstrating a dip in satisfaction broadly – but a particular dip on certain courses. One of the areas with lowest satisfaction among PGT students is understanding of marking criteria. Overall satisfaction is 75.9%; however, there is a range from several courses scoring 100%, to a worrying lowest score of 28% in the BPhil (with a considerable number of courses in the 60-75% region). Several courses, however, score 90% or above, which demonstrates potential to improve student satisfaction. There is notably reduced satisfaction with marking criteria and assessment among Overseas students, who are 5% below the average on both of these questions.
3. The survey asked four questions on assessment methods and timing. These asked students’ satisfaction with: the timing of assessment throughout the year; the balance of assessment methods (especially exams vs. coursework), and particularly the amount of course assessed by unseen examination.
4. Responses to questions are in Table 2. We would draw attention to the following:

* Almost a quarter of respondents did not believe the timing of assessment was appropriate for their course (elucidated in the free text comments below); just under half felt this was appropriate. When comparing divisions, this proportion was lowest in Humanities (40% appropriate; 30% not appropriate; 30% neither/nor, 3% N/A).
* 56% of respondents were happy with the balance of assessment between different methods, but 20% were not
* A quarter of students disagreed with the statement that they understood why their course used the balance of assessment (particularly with respect to unseen examinations and coursework) that it did

1. There was an interesting split between Home, EU and Overseas students, particularly on the issue of the proportion of assessment determined by unseen examination. While 63% of Home students agreed that the balance was appropriate, this fell to 52% in EU students and 51% for Overseas. (A similarly distinction was seen in those responding “Strongly disagree” to the appropriateness). Similarly, while only 15% of Home students disagreed that they understood the reasoning by the balance of assessment methods, 29% of EU students and 31% of Overseas students disagreed on that question.
2. This question also saw almost the only significant gender difference in the survey. On the question of satisfaction with the proportion determined by unseen examination, 47% of men were content with this, compared to 37% of women and other respondents. While this can be explained in part by gender differences by division, it was still clear that men were more satisfied with the proportion of unseen examinations.

*Table 2 - Assessment*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Strongly disagree | Disagree | Neither /nor | Agree | Strongly Agree | N/A |
| Timing of assessment (final term v previous) is appropriate | 8% | 15% | 20% | 42% | 8% | 7% |
| Balance of methods (eg exams v coursework) is appropriate | 6% | 14% | 16% | 43% | 13% | 8% |
| I am happy with amount determined by unseen examination | 7% | 15% | 16% | 30% | 11% | 21% |
| I understand why my course uses balance of methods it does | 9% | 15% | 14% | 40% | 14% | 8% |

1. The free text comments also focused on the issues of the balance of assessment methods employed, the timing of assessments within the year, and the amount of feedback offered on summative assessments. On the issue of balance of assessments, the comments tended to focus on the perceived inappropriateness of unseen examinations – or at least, where these formed a significant proportion of students’ final marks. The issue of “gaming” and choosing options based on assessment method, rather than necessarily on preference, was also raised; this is discussed further with respect to the focus groups below.

*It is sad that some people have to choose modules based on whether they are assessed by exam or by coursework.*

*I don’t understand why Oxford insists on sat exams – it seems quite antiquated to me, and I don’t see how that trains us to be academics.*

*If an MPhil is truly there to train us to be academics, writing three short pieces of work under extreme time pressure seems like an absurd method of assessing our credentials as future scholars.*

*At present, I have no notion as to why our assessment is balanced in its current manner, and it is something that I feel is important to understand.*

*I believe that the exam component is too high at 40%... The vast majority of other masters courses involved in this area of study are 100% coursework, although this is probably excessive, it gives perspective on how relatively high the exam component is here.*

1. The timing of assessments throughout the year was another significant area for comments. Comments tended to focus either on the gap between learning material (for instance, in Michaelmas) and being assessed on that material (e.g. in late Trinity Term); on assessment being focused at the end of the course, and a desire to spread this more throughout the year; or on particular pinch points such as in Hilary Term, and again a desire for more spread to avoid welfare concerns. Another key issue was the timing of assessments in relation to receiving feedback from previous assessed work; where the two were not coordinated, students felt that any gain from this feedback was lost.

*By the time we have received feedback from an assignment the next piece of work is due – with little or no time to include improvements in the current work.*

*Our modules are assessed between MT and HT and between HT and TT, in a number of essays which are all released at the end of Week 8 and due on Friday of Week 0 meaning that there is no break in between terms as it’s an intense essay writing time. Everyone in my course gave serious consideration to dropping out… because of the level of pressure and stress induced by the assessment format was that bad.*

*Work is returned comically tardy (sic).*

*Our tutors have told us to work on our dissertation (from scratch) plus work on our other mini-dissertation (from scratch) plus revise for 6 subject exams over the Easter break… Not only are you NOT getting any quality work from any students, but the students are NOT learning anything either and the students are constantly sick, tired and struggling to catch air.*

1. A final common issue was with the amount of feedback received on assessed work. Further to the concerns about delays in receiving this feedback, the quantity and usefulness of feedback was a major concern for students on some courses.

*From my course, we only receive a mark, no feedback, on our exams. This makes it really difficult to take away any learning from the examination process, or to understand what areas of knowledge remain weak.*

*After a wait of two months for the first piece of assessed work to be returned, there were only a few sentences of comment.*

*I do not feel we are prepared for the dissertation after the almost non-existent and vague quality of assessment and feedback we receive for our work.*

1. Assessment methods, timing and feedback also formed a considerable matter for discussion at focus groups. All three are somewhat interlinked (particularly in terms of how timing impacts on the usefulness of feedback), but the three will be discussed in turn.
2. There were a range of views on the balance of assessment methods used on PGT courses, but unsurprisingly, this depended on what balance was currently in place on that course. Where students had more choice in their assessment methods, or where the proportion of assessment that was determined by unseen examination was relatively low, students were more content.

*It seems silly to only be assessed on exams. The focus on this doesn’t test your ability to construct an argument or to know what you’re talking about.*

*The range of assessment is good. We have presentations, practicals, statistics and only one exam.*

*We have a qualifying exam, and essay and a dissertation. Regurgitating material is the least useful… the extended essay is a more useful skill.*

1. Questions about the use of certain assessment methods were particularly noticeable in the professional degrees (MPP, MBA, EMBA).

*Classroom assessments are not taken into account… It helps classrooms to work well together… It’s a professional course; it’s the expectation.*

*There is a lot of thematic assessment for a professional degree – a lot of essays.*

*Exams were often directed towards what was on lecture slides rather than content… Exams don’t seem the best way.*

1. A linked concern was where students felt they were in a position where they had to choose an option they were less keen on because it was examined by one method, compared to an option they would rather have taken but which was examined by another method (usually unseen examination).

*It’s problematic if you like the course material and then have to choose based on the assessment.*

*It… depends on the options chosen. We’re moving away from exams.*

*Some options have diverse methods.*

1. Another key issue raised in many focus groups was the timing of assessments during the year, and the extent to which assessments were spread throughout the year. This reflected many of the views seen in the free text comments to the survey. For example, on one of the professional courses, students commented on how the first two classes of Michaelmas Term were assessed in Trinity Term, and how further assessment in Michaelmas Term would have been of help. Issues with timing were echoed in other focus groups across divisions, although it is worth noting that there were considerable differences between disciplines in what would be considered preferable.

*The written work… would be better in late Trinity to get the most out of what you’re writing, and to have the chance to reflect on studio practice. (Masters in Fine Art)*

*More spread would benefit you even if the total number of assessments is not changed. (School of Interdisciplinary Area Studies)*

*We have seven [assessments] thrown in at once, in January, during the break, with DPhil applications. It may help to actually move them earlier, December.*

*We have nothing until February, but this makes sense because we’ve not learnt things yet.*

1. A final area of discussion was about the amount of feedback received after having completed summative assessments. In most cases, students felt that this was too limited to be of benefit to later assignments (or, indeed, after completing their course). The speed of returning feedback was also commented on in several cases.

*We have not received marks back – it has taken a term or two.*

*The marks on the research design essay came back too late to be of use.*

*I feel like quite a few decisions are made because of what is easiest for the examiners and not what is best for the students.*

*One tutor did aggregated feedback… the quality was limited, but it was something to have that intermediate step… we understand how the assessor will look at writing style, critique.*

*It is upsetting that you never identify strengths and limitations beyond a number.*

1. In multiple focus groups, the students reported that they had been informed the reasons for low amounts of feedback (and in one example, the reason for the high balance of unseen examinations) was due to restrictions by the *Proctors’ Office*, which the department was unhappy with. It remains to be seen the extent to which this reflects reality, given the current wording of the *Policy and Guidance*, which does permit the consideration of exam boards providing feedback. One student commented that the “concern for fairness seems bigger than learning anything”.
2. It is clear that there are three main areas of concern regarding assessment: the methods used, and the balance between unseen examinations and other methods; the timing of those assessments within the year, and how they coordinate with each other and other commitments; and the quality and timing of feedback provided on summative assessments. These are all issues that have been discussed before, and it is evident that steps have been taken to improve all three since the 2011 report. It is also clear that some issues are difficult to resolve – there can be genuine pedagogical reasons for making certain decisions about the timing and methods of assessment, and pressures on examination boards should be noted with respect to concerns about the quantity and timing of providing feedback. However, given the fairly strong student feedback on these issues, we would recommend several changes – particularly around the ways in which these decisions are communicated.

**Recommendation 4: Notwithstanding recent discussion by Quality Assurance Subcommittee, departments should continue to be encouraged to consider (in partnership with students) the balance of assessment methods used, especially where the proportion of work assessed by unseen examination is high.**

**Recommendation 5: Recognising differences between courses (and the views of students on those courses), the timing of summative assessments throughout the year should continue to be monitored, in particular to ensure students have the necessary skills for future work or study, and to reduce welfare concerns.**

**Recommendation 6: The University should review the current range of practices on the amount of feedback provided on summative assessments completed before the end of the course, highlight areas of good practice, and consider whether to strengthen the requirements of the current *Policy and Guidance* (paragraph 7.5(b)).**

**Recommendation 7: Greater consideration should be given to ensure that particularly international students are clear on marking criteria and what is expected in assessed work.**

**Contact hours and teaching practice**

1. There were concerns expressed in the previous PGT report (and the 2013 follow-up) about the number of contact hours with academic staff, and the quality of those interactions. It is clear that the number of contact hours are less important than the quality of those interactions – quality depending in part on the number of other students interacting with academic staff on that occasion.
2. The Student Barometer demonstrates reasonable satisfaction in this area – but also variation between courses. For instance, on the question about satisfaction with class size, the average of 90.5% (which is reasonably good) masks a difference between courses, ranging from 100%, down to 45%. There are a considerable number of courses in the 70-80% bracket. Furthermore, a similar average on the question about “getting time from academic staff” when the student needs it sees variation between courses, with about twenty courses seeing more concerning average figures that dip below 80%.
3. The survey asked students whether they were happy with the amount of contact time they received on their course, specifically mentioning lectures, tutorials, classes and seminars as examples of this. Exactly half of respondents were happy with this. In contrast, 10% felt the amount of contact time was too high. A further 40% felt this was too low (26% considerably so; 14% not quite enough).
4. There was, unsurprisingly, a reasonable difference between divisions on responses to this question – although a low number of responses in Medical Sciences and MPLS should be raised as a caution to the data. Compared to the average of 40% reporting that contact time was too little, this was only 15% in Medical Sciences (where 27% instead felt there was too *much* contact time), but was just over half in Humanities.
5. Free text comments elucidated a number of issues, mainly around the relative value of lectures versus tutorials or small classes, the total amount of contact time received, and students’ perception of the availability of academic staff compared to their expectations. The first two of these are summarised by quotes such as:

*Restructuring the modules to last longer or to perhaps have more lectures … where a human is teaching and one can have sessions to ask question would be ideal.*

*It would be very useful to have an additional tutorial each term.*

*… in a 24-week \*taught\* Masters programme, we receive a paltry 12 weeks of tuition.*

*The course is called a taught course, but for all purposes is a research course. We had classes 2 days a week for MT and HT, and no classes scheduled for TT.*

*Contact time for part-time students could be enhanced by online webinars*

*We have NO lectures – this course is a HUGE rip off*

*I understand that the complete absence of lectures in the second and third term is normal for Oxford. But nobody told us this before applying, and it is specified nowhere on the site.*

*I don’t find the graduate seminar to be very useful \*contact time\* and outside this I’ve had fewer than 7 hours of contact time this term, which feels very little for a taught masters* (note: this was completed in Hilary Term)

1. On the question of the availability of academic staff, a common point raised was about the absence of open office hours, or the difficulty in asking questions if a student is unsure about the material discussed in lectures.

*I understand that most of the professors have extremely busy schedules, but some of them made us feel as though we were wasting their time by asking them about any doubts or queries.*

*I expected much more contact time, especially with professors, not DPhil students, from a Masters programme at Oxford.*

*I think a habit of instituting office hours for professors would be a positive step.*

1. The focus groups produced fairly similar points. On the issue of contact hours overall, similar issues were raised across divisions, but particularly on certain Humanities and Social Sciences courses. Some examples of comments include:

*The taught courses seem rushed and not in enough depth… there is a limited number of seminars, and big amounts of detail covered in a short period of time. (Humanities)*

*We were told 2 tutorials per term, but it’s now much more ad hoc. (Humanities)*

*There is too little contact hours, but more importantly, classes should be more than model answers. (MPLS)*

*We pay so much for this course and we do expect something out of it… it needs more effort for a taught course (Social Sciences)*

1. There were also several discussions about the relevant benefits of lectures against other forms of teaching.

*I would highly encourage more interactive, practical types of learning. (Medical Sciences)*

*Lecturers get little information on what is expected from them, or who will be in lectures. The department is not interested in teaching Masters students (Medical Sciences)*

*The lectures are too rushed to be of use, and… it would be better to have time reading books. (MPLS)*

1. Another key point raised across divisions was the openness of lecturers, tutors or supervisors to answer questions. There was a general feeling across many of the courses that it could be difficult to access academic staff, contrary to the expectations that students had when starting the course. Office hours were again raised with some frequency, and students commented on the need for more individual support in some cases.

*The Faculty seems reticent to offer office hours or anything extraneous (Humanities)*

*We were told that it was unfair on some students if one student had an appointment with a supervisor (Social Sciences, professional course)*

*There was a proposal that every lecturer should have an open hour for questions… only one or two has done this. (MPLS)*

*We have different lectures at multiple times of day… but most [lecturers] we don’t see again. (Medical Sciences)*

*It’s advertised as introductory but some is pitched at the wrong level (Humanities)*

1. In contrast, some courses showed signs of excessive contact time, which students often questioned the value of.

*The number of hours in class is… too many. (Social Sciences, professional course)*

1. Contrary to what may seem apparent here, it does seem that there has been an improvement in contact hours (and students’ satisfaction with this) since the 2011 report. However the evidence presented here suggests that further work to consider the range of contact time made available to PGT students (for example, through a reduction in lectures – especially where these are shared with undergraduate students – in favour of smaller group teaching, even if infrequent), and a greater openness to discuss individual concerns would go a long way to improving PGT students’ satisfaction with their courses. This may simply be a case of making the rationale for certain teaching methods more obvious to students, and working with them to alleviate concerns for future years. It was evident from focus groups (not discussed in detail here) that student feedback is generally taken on board, and it is hoped this could be used further to improve courses.

**Recommendation 8: Departments should consider greater use of open office hours (or, if appropriate and possible, tutorials) by course directors or tutors, to allow students the opportunity to ask questions, clarify material and feel valued members of the department.**

**Recommendation 9: Divisions should continue to monitor the amount and quality of contact time received by taught graduate students to ensure it is sufficient across courses.**

**Recommendation 10: The rationale behind course structure, assessment methods, and timing should be made clearer to students when on course, and student feedback taken seriously to improve courses both for that cohort and for future years.**

**Expectations before arrival**

1. There is often a mismatch between PGT students’ expectations before arrival in Oxford, and the actual delivery of their course (including teaching style, assessment methods and timing, and the content of the curriculum). This may be due to any number of factors, including inappropriate expectations on the students’ part. However the clarity of information provided to PGT students before arrival, and after accepting an offer, is crucial – particularly given recent guidance by the Competition and Markets Authority, and the ramifications for not providing clear information to applicants.
2. The survey asked students about the clarity of various sources of pre-arrival information (open days, the University website and the graduate prospectus were given as examples). The results are given in Table 3 below, but key findings are:

* Only just over half of students felt that information on contact time was clear in advance. Similarly, 42% felt that information on teaching style and practice was unclear, or very unclear
* Less than half of students believed the role of the college was made clear
* Over 90% of students reported that fees and costs information was clear

*Table 3 – clarity of information provided before arrival*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Very clear | Clear | Unclear | Very unclear |
| Course layout | 21% | 53% | 19% | 7% |
| Contact time | 11% | 44% | 33% | 12% |
| Curriculum | 19% | 52% | 21% | 8% |
| Teaching style & practice | 11% | 47% | 32% | 10% |
| Assessment methods and timing | 16% | 51% | 24% | 9% |
| Role of colleges | 7% | 41% | 36% | 16% |
| Fees and other costs | 34% | 57% | 7% | 2% |

1. It was clear that EU and Overseas students felt this information was less clear than Home students did. For example, on the question of clarity of teaching style and practice, the percentage of students rating this to be Unclear or Very Unclear was 31% among Home students, but 46% among Overseas students and 51% for EU students. There was a similar finding for Assessment (Home 27%, EU 31%, Overseas 39%).
2. There were also evident differences between division, particularly in the areas of contact time, and teaching style and practice. This is perhaps to be expected, given that courses in Medical Sciences and MPLS are more prescribed; however, it does suggest that students particularly in Humanities are unclear before arrival on what they will be doing (65% reported that contact time information was unclear; 55% for teaching style).[[5]](#footnote-5)
3. A further question was asked on whether students’ expectations on the above issues, as based on pre-arrival material, were met in reality. Again, the results are in full below, but key findings are:

* Students’ reports on teaching style and practice varied– while 61% students said that their expectations were either exceeded or met in reality, 39% reported that they were not met – 12% significantly so
* There were similar findings for contact time, curriculum and assessment methods – between 30 and 40% of students felt their expectations in these areas were not met
* The role of colleges had the highest rate of students reporting an *exceeding* of their expectations, although almost a third felt instead that their expectations were not met

*Table 4 – reality of teaching experience compared to expectations*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Exceeded expectations | Met expectations | Did not meet expectations | Below expectations |
| Course layout | 5% | 68% | 18% | 9% |
| Contact time | 8% | 54% | 29% | 9% |
| Curriculum | 12% | 57% | 21% | 10% |
| Teaching style & practice | 11% | 50% | 27% | 12% |
| Assessment methods and timing | 4% | 62% | 25% | 9% |
| Role of colleges | 15% | 53% | 22% | 10% |
| Fees and other costs | 4% | 81% | 11% | 4% |

1. Once more, there were differences based on fee status, with EU and Overseas students feeling that their expectations were not as met as those of Home students. This was particularly noticeable again in Teaching style and practice (where almost half of Overseas students responded that their expectations for not met), and in Assessment methods and timing (40% not met for Overseas students).
2. The free text responses mostly covered three main areas. The first of these related to the content of the course and the manner in which this would be delivered. It was evident that for many students, this information was not clear – and the reality did not meet their expectations. The following comments are examples of a considerable number of remarks along these lines.

*The methods of teaching, duration of contact weekly, and the college roles were completely unidentified or misleading.*

*The curriculum was more clear for some parts of the course than others… many of [the options] were cancelled due to not enough interest. I was unable to take my first choice… which was advertised on the course page.*

*The Blavatnik School of Government sells one thing and delivers something completely different. They show core modules with the same importance as applied policy modules and that is a HUGE lie… Many core modules are useless… while most of the applied policy ones should be taught during longer periods.*

*It was not at all clear that the first term would be very basic introduction… and quite boring for people with prior knowledge.*

1. A second common point was the role of the college. This was not always a negative – many students reported being pleasantly surprised at the services and support provided by the college – but it is evident that the role is fairly unclear for many students before they arrive (or even after they have arrived). References to the college fee are not uncommon.

*Still not sure what the role of the college is for postgraduate study. Where does the college fee go to and how do I actually benefit from it regarding my degree?*

*I think the role of the college for Masters students should be stressed.*

*The fees should stress that there is a fee included to the college. The website said the course would be roughly £6000 (making it less than the majority of other Universities) but is in fact £9000 with this addition.*

*The role of the college was not fully explained. Had I known at the time, I would have chosen a different college.*

*At the outset of the course, the role of the college in our course was barely touched on, nor was it made explicit which colleges were available for us to apply to. As a result, I was assigned to a college I am dissatisfied with, and left with no option of change/appeal.*

*The colleges do nothing more for us than collect the yearly college fees. Students have no guarantee to accommodation… It baffles me what the essence is of paying a fee for no particular service rendered.*

1. The final key area discussed was assessment methods and timing. Further to the section above, it seems that many students are unaware of how and when they will be assessed before starting the course (or even at the beginning of their course). Although the final of the quotes given below could be seen as flippant, it is of course particularly important for international students to avoid excessive costs.

*It was a shock to find I was not going to be set an essay every two weeks – most humanities MSt courses offer this… it has ended up in a significantly less rigorous course than promised.*

*Not enough detail was given whether any of our work would be marked.*

*The assessment methods and timing, in particular, only became clearer when we were given a graduate student handbook by the faculty during the first introductory meeting.*

*Please tell us dates of revision and exams in advance so that we can plan our holidays.*

1. The focus groups provided support for the concerns raised in the free text responses and survey responses. There was particular concern for some students on the professional courses, which is worrying given the considerable fees attached to these courses.

*I asked for syllabi in advance and was refused – had I known [the course content] in advance, I may have chosen otherwise. (Social Sciences, professional course)*

*It spelled out the course precisely, but suggested there was an academic advisor – and there isn’t (Humanities)*

*I wa surprised on arrival how little teaching time there is – I feel like I’m paying for reading lists, libraries and high level of stress. (Humanities)*

*I tried to ask about the syllabus of the course in advance… and received this two weeks before. It was very disappointing to find this. (Social Sciences)*

*We didn’t know schedules, numbers of hours. It would have been useful to know this – in August time would have been good. (Social Sciences)*

*Some students had to relocate to Cambridge – but weren’t told this in advance of the course. (Medical Sciences)*

*Projects were changed at last minute – if you don’t like it, too bad. (Medical Sciences)*

1. It should be stressed that a perception that information was unclear does not specifically mean that the information provided by the University was, objectively, unclear. It is also recognised that it is impossible to spell out a course in full detail a year in advance, or even at the start of the course; tutors can go on sabbatical, there may be insufficient interested students to make a course viable etc. However, the level of student concern about the gap between expectations and reality suggests room for improvement.
2. We recommend that departments, in partnership with their students, consider if further clarity could be given to promotional and pre-arrival information. The collegiate University should also consider if it is possible to improve applicants (or, at the very least, offer-holders’) understanding of the role of colleges. OUSU strongly supports the maintenance of a college place for all students, and it is disappointing that so many students question the college’s purpose. It should be noted that in several focus groups, the importance of the college (and common room) was highlighted as a benefit of studying at this University.

**Recommendation 11: Promotional material, including course websites, should be written in consultation with current students to ensure its accuracy, usefulness and clarity.**

**Recommendation 12: Departments should consider providing further material about the course to offer-holders (or, preferably, applicants) in advance, while recognising the constraints of CMA guidance given that some material is subject to change.**

**Welfare and pastoral support**

1. OUSU remains concerned about the quality and signposting of welfare provision in the collegiate University. Our welfare survey completed this term demonstrated concern across the student body about welfare and pastoral support at all levels. However, the number of PGT respondents to the survey was low, making interpretation of the available data difficult. Nevertheless, it is clear that PGT students do still require pastoral support – and that the shorter time that PGT students are at the University for may limit their awareness of the available provision. It may also limit the extent to which colleges and departments engage with these students, further reducing the perception of an integrated pastoral support network.
2. Our survey asked students for their satisfaction with welfare and pastoral support from various sources:

* 70% were satisfied or very satisfied with support from tutors and supervisors; 13% were dissatisfied, and 8% very dissatisfied (9% responded N/A)
* 64% were satisfied or very satisfied with support from their department; 16% were dissatisfied, and 9% very dissatisfied (11% responded N/A)
* 66% were satisfied or very satisfied with support from their college; 15% were dissatisfied, and 8% very dissatisfied (11% responded N/A)
* 54% of students answered N/A to their satisfaction with other University facilities (particularly the Counselling and Disability Advisory Services). Of those who did reply, 78% were satisfied, 11% dissatisfied, and 11% very dissatisfied.

1. There was a small gap between Home, EU and Overseas students in their satisfaction with the welfare and pastoral provisions offered. For example, on the question of support from tutors and supervisors, while 21% of Home students and 28% of EU students said they were “very satisfied”, only 13% of Overseas students gave this response. There was a similar gap in the number of Overseas students reporting dissatisfaction – and a smaller but still noticeable gap was also present in the question about the department.
2. Free text responses focused mostly on two areas: the role of college advisors, and support from tutors and particularly supervisors. On the first, the responses were predominantly negative, with a view that college advisors had either been unresponsive or of little help. This is something OUSU has found before, and we were pleased that Conference of Colleges’ Quality Assurance Working Group (and subsequently, Graduate Committee) agreed this year to improve their baseline recommendation for colleges’ monitoring of college advisor provisions.

*My college tutor rarely responded to any messages… if the college tutor isn’t going to be responsive, there is no point in assigning a college tutor.*

*My college advisor has never met me, and implied asking to meet her would be burdensome… If I needed pastoral care in Oxford, I would be totally alone.*

*College advisor has never bothered to see me, his reply to my email was basically… ‘I’m on holidays, besides we don’t have to see each other face to face’.*

*My college tutor is absolutely invisible. I saw him once and never again. I really don’t understand what his role is.*

1. On the matter of tutors and supervisors, comments ranged from the positive to the severely negative. It has already been noted by the Subcommittee for Health and Welfare that graduate welfare should be a priority for future work, and it is hoped that this will be pursued.

*My supervisor for my dissertation has been wonderful – he is receptive, open to ideas, and helpful in guiding me.*

*My supervisor hasn’t always been very supportive when it comes to personal and mental health issues.*

*I feel very much like graduates are left to their own devices and this is not a good thing.*

*I believe there is a need for a more centralised university welfare system.*

*Tutors do not care about students. Feels like they are there because they have to be, not because they want to be.*

1. There was not a specific question in focus groups about welfare and pastoral provision, but a question was asked if time permitted. Some of the quotes in the focus groups that did discuss this provide opportunities for improving practice.

*The department doesn’t talk about welfare… some [students] have more affiliation with their college than others, and we don’t know who in the department to talk to about welfare. (Social Sciences)*

*There is an information overload. (Social Sciences)*

*Social events at the start would really help. (Medical Sciences)*

*I’ve not really looked so not of much help. However my college advisor is useless. We haven’t met… it depends on the advisor. (Social Sciences)*

*College is a good support system. (Social Sciences)*

1. In general, given the short period of time that most PGT students spend at the University, it would be beneficial to consider how to join up welfare and pastoral provision, and how best to promote this to students from the beginning of their course. Highlighting of college, departmental and University resources, and a reminder of these at appropriate intervals, would be worthwhile. It would also be worthwhile to consider the effect of courses’ structures on students’ welfare, as discussed above.

**Recommendation 13: The collegiate University should consider how best to join up welfare and pastoral provisions for PGT students, and to ensure they feel aware of resources and suitably supported during their short time at the University.**

**Careers and employability**

1. The issue of careers advice and employability more broadly arose in the 2011 review, and remains a concern for PGT students as evidenced in the Student Barometer and elsewhere. Part of the purpose behind PGT courses (or, at least, part of the inclination for students to take these courses) is to improve students’ prospects, be it for future study or for employment – and it is therefore valuable to ensure that these prospects *are* improved by these courses, and that students are made aware of the benefits offered.
2. The Student Barometer demonstrates that several questions in the area of careers and employability score comparatively poorly among PGT students. For example, on the question of careers advice from academic staff, only 67% of PGT students have reported satisfaction in this area (with a range between 18% and 100% across courses). The average is worse than for postgraduate research students (although is better than for undergraduate students. Notably, 19 courses in the University have an average below 50%. There is also a relatively lower level of satisfaction in the question of “learning that will help me get a good job”, with an average figure of 79%.
3. We asked students in the survey whether they felt that employability, or assistance with what to do next, formed part of their course – with several examples of ways in which the course could embed this. The full results are in the table below. It is perhaps unsurprising that students find individual interactions with tutors and supervisors to be a better source of careers advice and employability than, for instance, the content of examinations. However, it is clear that even this best source is not helping a considerable minority of students; approximately 40% (by answering Not really/Not at all to all five questions) indicated that careers and employability did not form part of their course.
4. The survey also asked students whether they would approach the academic staff in their department or college if they had a question about their future career. Similarly to the question in the table, 49% responded that they would, 27% were unsure, and 24% reported that they would not.

*Table 5 – whether employability or advice on future directions features in various sources*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Very much so | Slightly | Not really | Not at all |
| In course handbooks | 7% | 23% | 42% | 28% |
| In the curriculum | 12% | 27% | 35% | 26% |
| In the teaching delivery | 10% | 30% | 35% | 25% |
| In the examinations | 8% | 17% | 38% | 37% |
| In individual interactions with tutors/supervisors | 22% | 37% | 26% | 15% |

1. There was a small gap between Home and EU/Overseas students in these figures, most notably in the question on interactions with tutors and supervisors. While 51% of Home students responded Very much so or Slightly, this rose to 63% for EU and Overseas students. There was also a gender gap in the question of whether this was embedded in teaching delivery – the 60% of students who answered “not really” or “not at all” masks a difference between men (53%) versus women and other respondents (67%).
2. One common point made in the free-text comments was about the focus on academic careers in any advice provided (especially by tutors and in the department more broadly). While this is not surprising given that it may be difficult for academic staff to give advice outside their area, there was a general feeling that most of the information on offer was aimed solely at this choice of career, and many students had chosen these courses with other careers in mind (or, seeking guidance on a range of options).

*There is guidance on progressing to a DPhil but I do not think that employability really comes into the discussion at this stage.*

*My impression is that unless you are interested in a career in academia, there is not much your department/tutor will/can help with.*

*Apart from an academic career, nothing much is being promoted or taken into account.*

1. Other comments focused on the lack of careers advice or support embedded in the curriculum or discussions with tutors. It should be noted that some were more positive about this.

*There is no formal support with establishing careers following the course.*

*This course completely FAILS to address career prospects. There are no internships created for us and no ideas given as to how to apply what we have learned.*

*One of the main reasons I chose the course was my expectation to become equipped with the necessary toolbox for analysis. However since the teaching on methods is rather weak, I don’t feel much prepared to engage with policy analysis in a professional context.*

*A very good careers session was held in MT.*

1. A question was asked on careers and employability in every focus group. A minor but noteworthy point was the near unanimity with which this would be greeted by a laugh from most of the students present. It was evident that many students felt this was not a part of their course, or that advice from academic staff was limited. Some comments are given below which reflect this view.

*[This is]… a strange faculty where people can't say what to do after (Humanities)*

*Beyond a perfunctory experience, students turned away when they ask [about careers]. Not finding a job on a professional course… is very disappointing. (Social Sciences, professional course)*

*With art courses, it’s difficult to get advice right – but our expectations are fairly low. The MFA is set up to lead people into DPhil, but this isn't really pushed. (Master of Fine Art)*

*We brought it up at GJCC about applying for the DPhil – we were told it wasn't their [the department’s] responsibility and that we should talk to individual supervisors instead (Medical Sciences)*

*Most careers advice is tailored towards students from the UK, or doing a PhD within the UK. It is limited for doctors… there is pretty much nothing (Medical Sciences)*

1. Students did reference the Careers Service in some focus groups. Others were less aware of the Service’s work when prompted, and it seemed like a particularly good way of highlighting the Careers Service’s work was when staff came to the students’ department to run a session during teaching hours.

*We had a careers event which was of use. The Careers Service reaches out to the department and offers one on one sessions in the department. (Social Sciences)*

*We had an afternoon of speaking to ex-students about what they've done… [and a] careers day at OUCS (Medical Sciences)*

1. It is clear that the University has the Careers Service to offer this advice, and the Student Barometer demonstrates that students who use the Careers Service are very satisfied with this. Furthermore, when asked who they would ask about careers advice if not academic staff, many respondents to the survey indicated the Careers Service. However the focus groups suggest that some students are more aware of the Service than others, and it may help for departments to draw students’ attention to this more effectively as a supplement to advice from academic staff.

**Recommendation 14: Departments, working with the Careers Service, should consider how to better embed careers and employment advice and support in the curriculum (particularly for international students, and for careers outside academia).**

**Conclusions and recommendations**

1. A review of this kind, which asks students for their views on their course, has a habit of being necessarily negative. It should be noted that students in focus groups were often keen to temper their views with positive comments on various aspects of their courses and their time at the University. However, we remain concerned that the quality of Masters courses at the University – and the level of student satisfaction with those courses – is, in places, below the excellent quality for which the University holds an international reputation. This is noteworthy given that this reputation is part of the reason for the considerable (and rising) number of applications for PGT study.
2. It is hoped that the findings of this review, and the recommendations repeated below, will help to elucidate potential improvements that could improve student satisfaction further, as seen in response to the improved *Policy and Guidance* several years ago.
3. Below the fourteen recommendations already discussed are two more. The first relates to collecting and acting upon student feedback. The University has made considerable efforts to improve student engagement and representation in recent years, and it is hoped this will be simple to implement as a result. The second relates to the setting of fees. Since it was considered unhelpful, this report did not reflect the frequency of comments such as “especially considering how much we’re paying”. However, this was a common point made in both free text survey responses and in focus groups. OUSU will be working with the University to improve student involvement in fee-setting in future years, and we hope that this recommendation will be enacted as a result.

**List of recommendations**

**Recommendation 1: Departments, divisions and, where appropriate, the University should work to ensure first that the current *Policy and Guidance* on formative feedback is being adhered to, but moreover, that departments make considerable efforts to enhance the amount of formative feedback provided to PGT students.**

**Recommendation 2: The timing and amount of formative assessment should be considered in partnership with students, to ensure it is providing pedagogical benefit. Consideration should be given as to whether excessive formative assessment could be converted into *summative* assessments to alleviate concerns about its value.**

**Recommendation 3: More consideration should be given at the departmental level as to whether the format, content and feedback provided for formative assessments effectively matches the summative assessments that students on that course will complete, to ensure the assignments truly are *formative*.**

**Recommendation 4: Notwithstanding recent discussion by Quality Assurance Subcommittee, departments should continue to be encouraged to consider (in partnership with students) the balance of assessment methods used, especially where the proportion of work assessed by unseen examination is high.**

**Recommendation 5: Recognising differences between courses (and the views of students on those courses), the timing of summative assessments throughout the year should continue to be monitored, in particular to ensure students have the necessary skills for future work or study, and to reduce welfare concerns.**

**Recommendation 6: The University should review the current range of practices on the amount of feedback provided on summative assessments completed before the end of the course, highlight areas of good practice, and consider whether to strengthen the requirements of the current *Policy and Guidance* (paragraph 7.5(b)).**

**Recommendation 7: Greater consideration should be given to ensure that particularly international students are clear on marking criteria and what is expected in assessed work.**

**Recommendation 8: Departments should consider greater use of open office hours (or, if appropriate and possible, tutorials) by course directors or tutors, to allow students the opportunity to ask questions, clarify material and feel valued members of the department.**

**Recommendation 9: Divisions should continue to monitor the amount and quality of contact time received by taught graduate students to ensure it is sufficient across courses.**

**Recommendation 10: The rationale behind course structure, assessment methods, and timing should be made clearer to students when on course, and student feedback taken seriously to improve courses both for that cohort and for future years.**

**Recommendation 11: Promotional material, including course websites, should be written in consultation with current students to ensure its accuracy, usefulness and clarity.**

**Recommendation 12: Departments should consider providing further material about the course to offer-holders (or, preferably, applicants) in advance, while recognising the constraints of CMA guidance given that some material is subject to change.**

**Recommendation 13: The collegiate University should consider how best to join up welfare and pastoral provisions for PGT students, and to ensure they feel aware of resources and suitably supported during their short time at the University.**

**Recommendation 14: Departments, working with the Careers Service, should consider how to better embed careers and employment advice and support in the curriculum (particularly for international students, and for careers outside academia).**

**Recommendation 15: The University should consider whether the Student Barometer alone is sufficient to examine the satisfaction of PGT students (given its timing), and whether focus groups later in the academic year may be of benefit.**

**Recommendation 16: Fee increases on PGT courses should not be considered in the absence of consistently positive student feedback, a clear pedagogical rationale, and provision for increased student bursaries or scholarships – and should ideally not be considered at all.**

Appendix – Focus groups

Course representatives on all postgraduate taught programmes were contacted to set up focus groups. A request was also sent to several colleges with high numbers of PGT students. Fifteen focus groups were conducted in total. These were:

*Humanities*

Faculty of Music (all taught courses)

Master of Fine Art

Faculty of Linguistics, Philology and Phonetics (all taught courses)

*Social Sciences*

Master of Public Policy

Department of Sociology (all taught courses)

School of Interdisciplinary Area Studies (all taught courses)

Department of International Development (all taught courses)

Said Business School (students on the MBA and EMBA programmes)

*MPLS*

Department of Computer Science (all taught courses)

Department of Statistics (all taught courses)

*Medical Sciences*

MSc Neuroscience

MSc Psychological Research

MSc in Clinical Embryology

MSc in Radiation Biology

There was also a focus group with students from across courses at St Antony’s College.

Focus groups took place in Hilary and Trinity Term 2016. Most were facilitated by the Vice-President (Graduates), but three were conducted by other OUSU staff or officers due to the respective availability of students and the Vice-President (Graduates). Focus groups featured 3 to 10 students, and took between 30 and 80 minutes (the average length was approximately 50 minutes).

The format of the focus groups was semi-structured. Participants were made aware that there were a series of questions (given below) that would be asked, but that there was no problem with veering from these if necessary. Additional questions were also asked if it was felt it would elucidate our understanding of students’ experiences on their courses.

**Questions**

**Feedback and assessment**

* Most courses have “formative” assessments – essays or similar, that don’tcount towards your final grade. For the formative work you’ve done, how do you feel about the amount you’ve done, and the quality of feedback you’ve received from tutors on this?
* Has the feedback from your tutors on formative assessment helped you with submitting *summative* assessments? (those that do count towards the final grade)
* How do you feel about the balance of assessment methods on your course (exams vs coursework), and the balance of timing of those assessments? (between MT, HT, TT)

**Expectations v teaching**

* How well do you feel you understood the course (especially how you would be taught and assessed) before you came to Oxford?
* What are your thoughts on contact time with academic staff – too much, too little, just right?
* (if time permitted) Where you’ve offered feedback to academic staff, are you happy with whether that has been listened to?

**Careers and other provisions**

* Do you feel the faculty and tutors have given you useful advice on careers and what to do next?
* (if time permitted) How do you feel about the pastoral and welfare support from tutors, and in the faculty, colleges and in the University?

**Acknowledgements**

Thanks go to Cat Jones, Matt Tennant and Jacob Page for facilitating the three focus groups that I could not attend, and to all the course reps who were so helpful in setting up the focus groups (including a couple where we simply could not find a time). Finally, many thanks go to the c. 100 students who took part in focus groups, and the 500 who filled out the survey – and I hope the report has set out these students’ views effectively.

1. The policy is stated in the *Policy and Guidance on PGT courses*, Section 7.6 <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/edc/policiesandguidance/pgpgtaughtcourses/7assessment/#d.en.222063> and in the *Policy and Guidance for Examiners*, Section 13 <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/edc/policiesandguidance/pgexaminers/13feedbackandresits/#d.en.175276> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <http://www.admin.ox.ac.uk/edc/policiesandguidance/pandgoncourseinformation/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. CMA advice for HE Providers - <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/higher-education-consumer-law-advice-for-providers-and-students> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Note that in this table and others, the exact wording of the questions has been condensed for ease of presentation. The full wording is available on request, but was longer to provide students with clarity of what the question was asking (for example, defining “formative work” as work that does not count towards the final grade. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. It should be noted that satisfaction was not significantly different between divisions on, for example, the role of colleges or fees – suggesting that students’ concerns about lack of clarity are limited to the specifics of their academic experience. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)