

ANNUAL EDUCATION REVIEW

2020-21

LANCASTER UNIVERSITY
STUDENTS' UNION

ACADEMIC
REPS

ANNUAL EDUCATION REVIEW 2020-21

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INTRODUCTION

The info here is collated from 457 registered Academic Representatives providing feedback from every level of study, across all four faculties.

2020/21 presented students with an unprecedented study experience where they were required to adapt quickly to the unique challenges of remote and blended learning.

Despite fewer resources, the Students’ Union is now supporting a higher number of registered reps than ever with our average number of reps up 25% over the last five years, and attendance at Faculty Forums was up 37% from last year alone.

Feedback to the University has been provided throughout the year via the established processes in departments and faculties and specific service providers where needed. This year also saw more reps engaging in various Lancaster University working groups and projects to provide the student voice.

Despite the challenges faced, students have generally spoken positively of the work undertaken by academics and professional services staff during this challenging year. Students mostly feel their feedback and concerns have been heard and acted upon. Reps have reported a sense of community awareness of the extra strain and pressure that the Pandemic has placed on everyone. Although, there is also a general sense that the ‘Institution’ has not provided resources or appropriate guidance to enable staff and services to deliver.

This report aims to collate students’ headline issues this year, draw attention to work that is underway, and highlight some education-related issues that student feel needs more consideration from the University. Further details and more department specific information can be found in the Faculty Reports produced by Faculty Reps.

We also hope it will highlight just how much hard work is undertaken by student volunteers to support and improve the University experience for others.



Atree Ghosh - on behalf of Lancaster University Students’ Union Academic Executive

THE ACADEMIC REP PROJECT 20/21:

The Students' Union (SU) supports, facilitates and empowers Student Reps from every level of study (UG/PGT/PGR) and every Faculty (FASS, FHM, FST, LUMS).

In 2020/21, we had:

- **457** Academic Reps registered with the SU (a **25% increase** in numbers over the last 5 years).
- **53** students held Senior Rep roles such as Faculty or 'Lead' (Department) reps.
- **95%** of Reps completed training with the SU
- **226** Reps completed additional training with an external facilitator.
- **21** Student-led Faculty Forums take place over the year with an average attendance of **276** reps per set.
- Facilitated **6** Postgraduate Forums

We compiled the information in this report from what thousands of students told us via their reps as well as from surveys about their experiences this year.

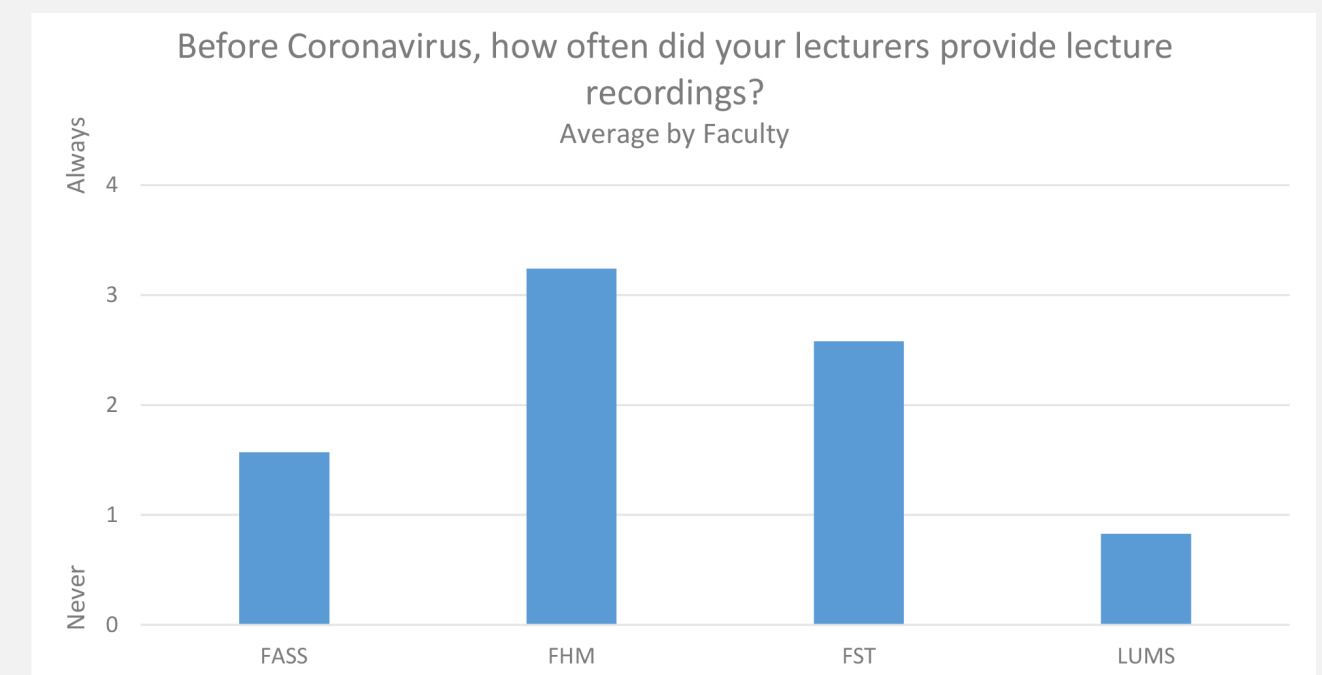
The Students' Union had approximately 40 contact hours with Reps this year to help compile this report.

LEARNING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Since being introduced to blended learning this academic year, many students have thrived with the mix of in-person teaching (where available) and online learning and have requested this method of teaching continue beyond the Pandemic. Although some said they had less access to independent learning resources, e.g., office hours or Q and A sessions were restricted.

LECTURE RECORDING

Students have been very happy to see the widespread use of Lecture recording because of remote and blended learning. For a number of years students have requested and campaigned for the University to overcome the barriers preventing lecture recordings from being standardised. Students who speak English as an additional language and students with disabilities look to benefit in clear ways. In addition, many students are hopeful that recordings will assist them with exam revision.



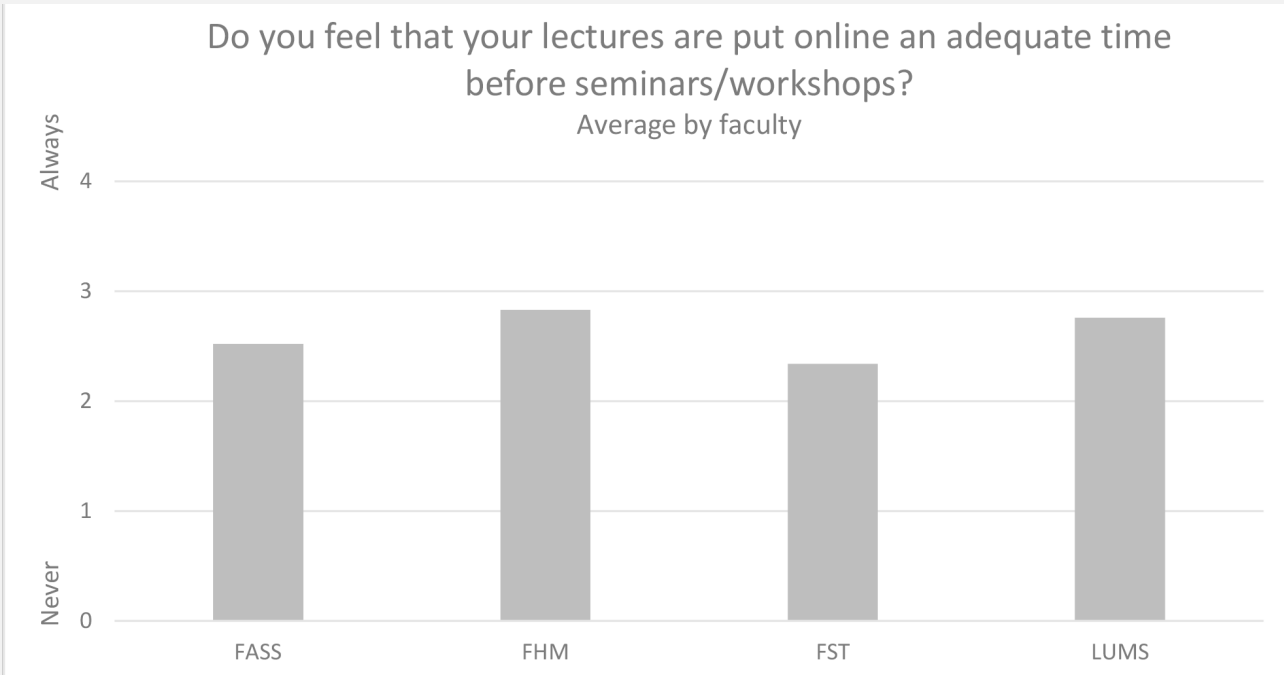
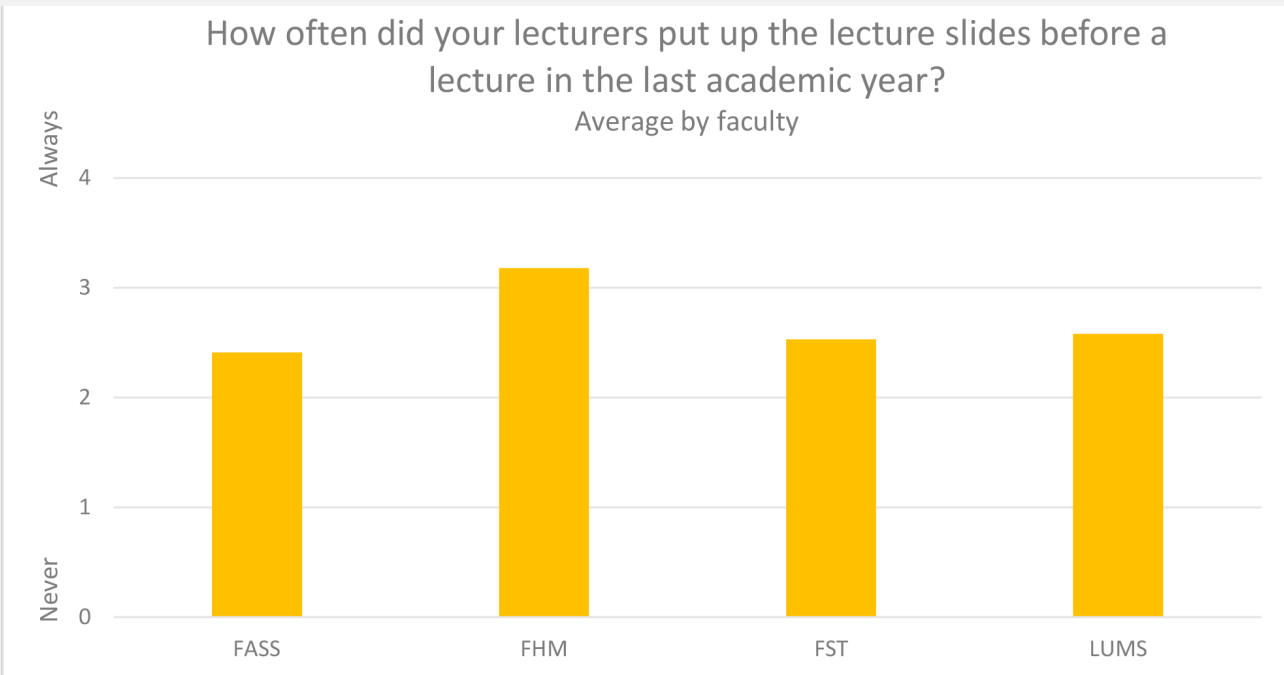
ASYNCHRONOUS VS SYNCHRONOUS CONTENT

Some common themes arose about asynchronous vs. synchronous content teaching this year including:

* Source : 'Improve your Learning'

- Students want content to be uploaded in advance, with reasonable time between release and the teaching session using that information.
- Students want content (recorded and live) to fit within the limits of teaching schedules, e.g. a single lecture should still be 50 minutes even if it was pre-recorded. Students reported feeling overwhelmed when receiving too much content. Similarly, live lectures need to finish before the end of the hour to give students time to take a comfort break before the next session. Some students reported going without breaks for hours at a time.

Most Departments acted upon this feedback from Reps during Michaelmas term. They started ‘chunking’ long sessions into manageable amounts, reducing length and finishing on time.

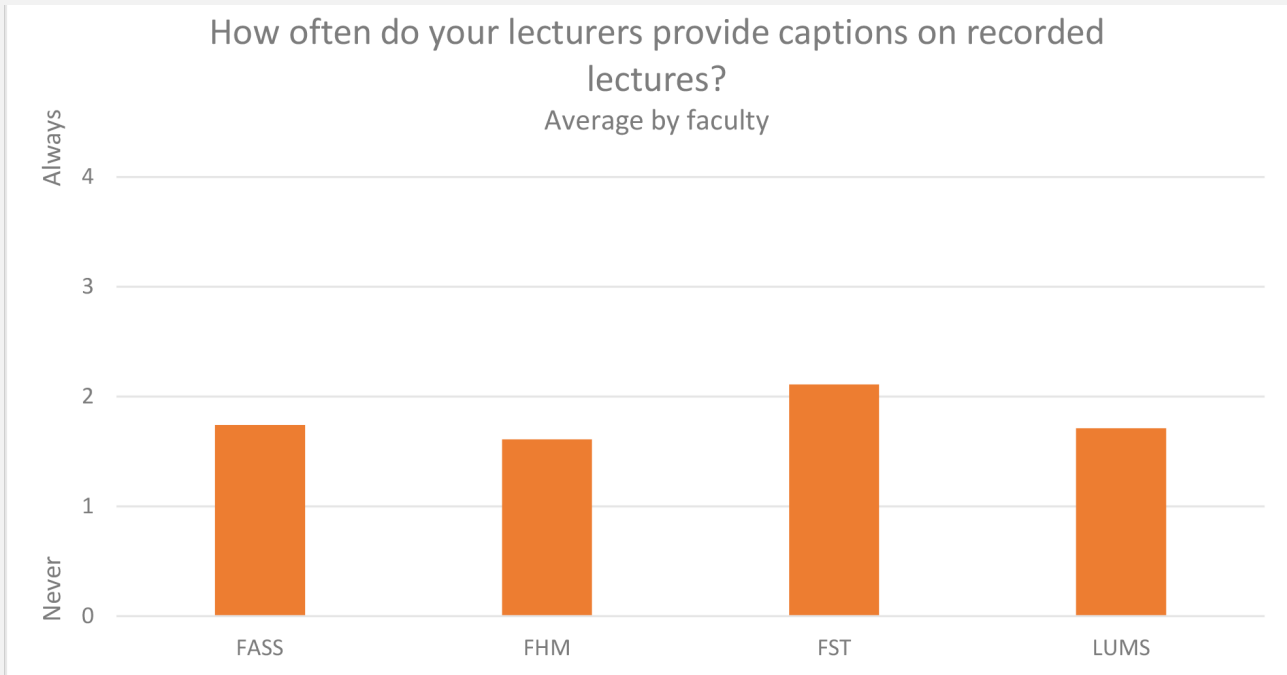


* Source : ‘Improve your Learning’

CAPTIONING

Not all staff were captioning their content at the beginning of the year. This caused a number of issues including an increase in language barriers, difficulties when staff had inappropriate audio equipment, and specifically affected students with accessibility needs.

While departments were quick to resolve the issue where they could, captions still aren’t standardised across the University. They remain complicated by individual staff preferences and the different software used by staff, e.g. Panopto vs Teams, which is still causing some problems



ASSESSMENT FEEDBACK TURNAROUND TIMES

Some students have said that they have not received marks and feedback on assessments within the four-week timescale outlined by the University. This can have knock-on effects into the next term and new teaching material. In some cases, students were unable to learn from previous assessments before their next deadlines.

Does your department meet the four-week turnaround deadlines?

Yes 70% No 30%

* Source : ‘Improve your Learning’

ACADEMIC SAFEGUARDING

Every single student we asked this year was in favour of an academic safeguarding policy. While many wanted a 'safety net policy' following the lead of other universities, the response to the final policy was generally positive.

A few concerns remained, that are of note:

- Creative subjects such as those in FASS (e.g. LICA) feared that safeguarding was not inclusive of their subjects and assessment methods compared to STEM subjects.
- The mandatory exams are a significant worry for first and second years who haven't sat exams at university yet.
- There was the suggestion the 2:1 average required for study abroad was too high given the uncertainty of assessments and should be downgraded to a 2:2 to prevent students from missing out.
- Students with degrees with accredited elements were left behind due to not being able to avail the same safeguarding policies as a result.

MOODLE

Moodle has presented problems all year, from VPN issues for international students, to a lack of clarity on the module and departmental pages, to inconsistent design between pages causing confusion and navigational issues for some. They have also expressed frustration about assignment submission spaces that are not optimised to accept recorded presentations or new assignment submissions. Certain online material, e.g. videos from Box Of Broadcasts or YouTube, are unable to be accessed by certain students who are either restricted by local laws or personal restrictions.

Reps in LUMS have been lobbying for a universal approach, whereby all departments follow a standard layout to be agreed. They have also suggested enabling students to provide feedback about their experiences of using specific module pages to the staff that manage those areas.

THE LIBRARY AND STUDY SPACES

The library was another source of concern for many students including PGR's. Some pandemic restrictions have meant borrowing physical books was not an

option. In addition, students have been told that budgeting issues meaning the library was not able to purchase more electronic products or digital licenses, leaving many students and researchers without critical resources.

Since returning to in-person access, booking and availability of study spaces has become an issue. Students have said it's challenging to secure a space at peak times and that the 15 hour-a-week booking limit needs to be extended to reflect reasonable access needs. It is also common that when students do book and turn up, someone else is already in their spot.

Do you book ahead before you go to the library?

No 83% **Yes** 17%

ASSESSMENT AND EXAMINATION

Student cohorts from various levels of Taught study expressed concerns about assessments this year.

- First years often reported that they have not received adequate guidance around what is expected from them at a higher education level assessment.
- Second years do not have exam experience at university following adaptations from the previous academic year due to Covid-19. Many are concerned that as part two students they still lack practice and yet the exams they sit this year will go towards their classification.
- Third years are concerned their final exams will be completed under alien and/or inappropriately designed circumstances that might put them at a disadvantage.
- Students on practical degrees have been unable to gain relevant lab, workshop, or placement experiences and have had significantly less time to develop the necessary practical skills. Leading to some students questioning the value of their degree or lodging complaints that they have not received the degree that was promised.

Exam duration was also raised as a concern in some departments. Especially in LUMS where departments such as Accounting and Finance, Economics and Management Science have implemented short exams, which is causing distress for some students. While students acknowledge that these shorter exams have been approved by the University, students are still very apprehensive about them, and Reps predict that students may contest their

results when they are published. If shorter exams are to remain, Reps have suggested some kind of additional support for this exam format through resources such as Embrace Digital.

ATTENDANCE MONITORING

Reps have reported 'Check in codes' causing disruption or inaccurate records because the current system required staff to share codes which either doesn't happen, or happens several times a session, disrupting content. International students have expressed specific concerns due to their visa's being dependant on attendance and are having to go to greater lengths to ensure they are checked in. Reps in LUMS have suggested only providing codes at the end of sessions so they are released once and students don't just check in at the start and are then able to leave.

MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING:

"The impact of the pandemic on mental health has clear impacts on academic performance and must be treated holistically"

Concerns about the mental health of students were consistently raised from every level of study within every faculty this year. Students felt it was important that the University acknowledged that they are learning in a pandemic, not just studying online. As such, they may also be impacted by stresses and responsibilities in addition to the change in teaching and socialising. Students repeatedly raised concerns about wellbeing and mental health. Including:

- Students feeling burnout. Reports stated students feel overstimulated and overwhelmed a lot quicker, e.g. resources are made available all at once, and it causes pressure because they don't know where to start.
- Students reported feeling isolated this year, with many saying this affected their studies. Some departments have tried to resolve this through organising social events online, e.g. tea breaks, quizzes, evening socials. However, this doesn't reach the extremely isolated students, meaning there is an unknown quantity of students in need of support falling through the net.
- Departmental pastoral support and signposting was another inconsistency. Some departments were great, while some students felt abandoned and

ignored by their staff. Many students reported being aware that staff were also overwhelmed and not wanting to add additional pressure on them by seeking help.

- Many departments initially said they would take the pandemic into account when marking students' work, but the lack of specific guidance for this until late into the year has worried students. They were concerned about how this will be regulated, so their grades reflect their work and the quality of the institutions' teaching rather than just giving everyone the benefit of the doubt and inflating grades.
- Reps would like to see more informal contact sessions for students to gather with staff and peers and discuss mental health issues, as well as more awareness amongst staff about how to provide adequate pastoral support to those suffering with poor mental health.
- Some student reported that demanding workloads caused severe negative impact on mental health; this led to Law implementing increased welfare and pastoral support.
- Best practice examples include departments organising informal contact sessions such as Centre for Gender and Women's Studies coffee mornings.

Has your department acknowledged that the current circumstances in which students are studying are hard?

Yes 87.5% No 12.5%

TIMETABLING

Most timetabling issues were exacerbated by the Pandemic, which caused significant stress for students this year.

The late timetable release affected student travel at the start of both Michaelmas and Lent term. For example, the delay caused mental and financial problems for many, as travel and accommodation plans were uncertain and had to be changed last minute. Students felt the University was indifferent to the late release and didn't provide adequate support for the circumstances.

HANDBOOKS

The late release of handbooks created challenges for students. Without a guide to their learning, they were left without critical information such as learning objectives, teaching structures and assessment methods/ weighting and marking criteria. Some departments, for example Economics were very late in releasing their handbooks. These types of delays led to students reporting that entire terms had already gone by whilst they still waited. In some cases student lacked up to date exam information in their handbooks at the start of the summer term as exams began.

‘TRAVEL-WINDOW’ PROBLEMS

Advice issued towards the end of Michaelmas term regarding the ‘Student travel window’ caused some problems when it clashed with assessment deadlines. However, many reps reported that in light of this their departments were flexible and offered extensions and special considerations if needed. Flexible extensions on assignments at the end of Michaelmas were widely available and appreciated although some students noted it had knock on consequences by affecting their time set aside to prep for the next term.

Reps in the Medical School also reported this causing confusion for students on placement who were told they must remain on their placements regardless of government guidance to use the travel window.

ACADEMIC ADVISORS

Would you prefer 1:1 meetings with your Academic Advisor instead of group ones?

Yes 88% **No** 23%

Student awareness of additional support systems has increased this year and the Academic Advisor system has come under particular scrutiny. It became clear there are issues and inconsistencies within the current system that need to be addressed including:

- PGT students don’t have Academic Tutors but feel they would be particularly valuable given the shortness of their courses.
- Joint major students are usually only given one Tutor, and so only have support for one element of their degree. Most of these students said they

would benefit from one from each major so they have appropriate support in all aspects of their learning. Especially if their other major is in a different Faculty or discipline.

- Students’ don’t know what they don’t know. Many students didn’t know about the scheme or even who their Advisor was. Where students did know their tutors it was because these tutors had been proactive in contacting the students they supported.
- There was confusion over the role played by Academic Advisors. Are they for academic concerns and study skills or pastoral issues? The lack of central university guidance meant this varied across the institution. Student’s requested advisors are better trained in pastoral care and signposting and have access to ILSPs to provide well-rounded support beyond just academic issues.
- Advisor engagement either came in 1:1 or group meetings. Group meetings were great for creating a little community among students that some liked, especially those returning from time away from their degrees, while others felt it was detrimental to their experience because they couldn’t ask private questions or form a proper relationship with their Advisor.
- Students also reported concerns about advisors and academic references. How can accurate references be provided if students do not have relationships or contact with Tutors?

Good practice: Linguistics and English Language students reported high levels of satisfaction with the operation of their Academic Advisor system

COMMUNICATION

Reps reported that student felt generally ‘in the dark’ for much of the year and lacked clear communication from the university about changes as the year progressed. This is linked in part to the lack of face-to-face contact, but students also said they felt the communication they did receive was more concerned with how the University looked rather than the students. It was also suggested that the info was only received at the end of processes that students were unaware of. This led to frustration and students feeling that nothing was happening in the meantime. Students expressed that they would have valued the availability of informal information or ‘work in progress’ updates.

Some departments provided regular newsletters or updates from Heads of Department and this was welcomed for offering reassurances that students were not being forgotten.

The Academic Safeguarding policy was appreciated but students felt communication could have been made more accessible, jargon-free, and so more student friendly.

Good practice: Reps hope that other departments follow suit with the promise made by The Law School to have ‘welcome back week’ to help integrate 1st and 2nd years back to ‘normal’ uni life.

POSTGRADUATE RESEARCH EXPERIENCES & PROJECTS

The overwhelming message from Postgraduate Research (PGR) feedback this year is that they felt forgotten about. Most of the support and Covid-19 guidance was tailored towards taught students and general communication from the university did not address the specific circumstances and requirements of PGR students.

Although the additional flexibility provided by remote working has enabled increased engagement by PGR volunteers for PGR representative roles. The total number of filled senior PGR rep roles has tripled in the last 12 months.

GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANTS

Guidance for Graduate Teaching Assistants (GTAs) varied across the University and individual departments. Amendments to teaching practices promised to taught students did not translate to guidance or communications being issued to those that would teach them. Leaving some GTAs unable to answer questions from the undergraduates that they teach.

Some GTA's were given the choice between online or in-person teaching at the start of the year when blended learning was an option. Some GTAs however, felt forced to teach in person, reporting concerns about working environment negatively affecting their teaching and general well-being. The Doctoral Academy worked with our Reps to identify the departments where this was happening and were able to reach satisfying solutions with the students and staff involved.

GTAs have been discussing parking access this year. This has been an issue outside of the pandemic with GTAs working as teaching staff but having limited or no access to staff parking facilities. However, it became a more pressing issue this year with all staff required to take twice a week testing on campus, meaning GTAs were sometimes forced to return to campus multiple times for teaching and testing if the two were not available at the same time, paying for multiple parking sessions.

INCLUSIVE LEARNING AND SUPPORT PLANS

Inclusive Learning and Support Plans (ILSP's), which help to outline a student's support needs, are not currently accessible to staff who teach those students. Students' reported that they assumed all their teaching staff would know about their requirements, whilst GTA's reporting not having access to this information. The result was teaching staff not providing reasonable adjustments and being hindered in their ability to facilitate student's needs. Reps have requested that the issue of ILSP transparency is looked into to enable information to be shared appropriately.

DOCTORAL CONSORTIUM

This year saw the creation of a new consortium of PGR representatives facilitated by the Student's Union. Initiated by our PGR Faculty Reps, the Consortium will ensure that PGR voice is representative within the growing portfolio of work in the Doctoral Academy (DA). This includes the creation of eight DA Reps who will work with the DA on specific streams and projects. These streams focus on a specific element of the PGR experience at Lancaster, such as Research Funding or the PGR community.

PHD FUNDING

Many PhDs have had their research interrupted by lack of access to campus and resources this year. Their funding is usually allocated for a set period of time, which means that funding is running out due to the delayed caused by covid-19. These students have inquired about funding extensions, but many are still awaiting decisions and do not know if they have the financial capability to complete their studies.

REP ENGAGEMENT IN PROJECTS AND DEVELOPMENTS

ACADEMIC TUTORS REVIEW

Reps raised concerns about the functionality of the Academic Tutor/ Advisor system, with significant inconsistencies in the student experience across the University. From questions about whether Advisors are for academic or pastoral support, to 1:1 or group meetings with advisors, to changing or keeping advisors throughout a student's time at Lancaster, many aspects of the advisor experience were reported. LU has now established a working group to review the system. This group has received rep feedback and will continue working with Reps. This project is still ongoing and the University is considering actions such as providing PGTs with Tutors and providing more support and guidance for the UG system.

EMBRACE DIGITAL FOR STUDENTS

Academic Reps volunteered to consult on the ISS project Student "Embrace Digital", an in-depth resource to aid online and blended learning. The site functions like the staff one and provides students with support for online issues such as using Moodle, Teams etiquette, negotiating group work and exams online. Students welcomed the site and spoke positively once it was launched although some expressed frustration at the launch coming so late in the year.

NO DETRIMENT POLICY

Student officers lobbied the University to ensure that students' education would not be further disadvantaged this year because of lockdown measures. Bee, the former VP education, worked with Reps to identify key areas of concern and fed this into the University 'Academic Safeguarding Policy' development. This included temporary changes to a number of processes to help mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on assessment and learning. Including exam resits, mitigating circumstances, transparent external examiner

processes, condonation ranges, scaling of marks, progression requirements, and additional ways to achieve higher classifications. Some changes will remain in place for at least three years to continue to address the impact of COVID-19 beyond the initial pandemics and lockdowns.

UNIVERSITY STRATEGY CONSULTATION

Reps were invited to take part in a review of the first phase of the University's strategic plans looking ahead to 2025. They joined discussions about potential structural reform of the distinctive elements of a 'signature Lancaster curriculum' in teaching, research and engagement. Reps helped to refine the University's value statements, which form the basis of the strategic plans.

OIA DISCUSSION GROUP

Our Reps were invited to take part in a review on how COVID-19 has influenced learning experiences with the OIA (Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education). The OIA is an independent body set up to review student complaints within higher education providers in England and Wales.

STUDENT COMPLAINTS PANELLIST

Our Reps have been offered opportunities to sit as a student representative member on University Complaints panels, ensuring that student are treated fairly and that policy and procedures are appropriately followed. Although Reps engaged in panels felt that more guidance should be offered about what is entailed in working on a complaints panel to allow volunteers to make informed decisions about the role.

STUDENT PANELLIST FOR COLLEGE REVIEW

Reps were offered a paid opportunity to take part in the 5-year review of Lancaster University's partnership institutions. The results of which were to form a report for Academic Standards and Quality consideration.

MODULE FEEDBACK

Reps flagged concerns about how departments gather module feedback and questioned whether module feedback processes are fit for purpose. With some student's suggesting that feedback should be gathered in different ways, or at different times to give more accurate information. A working group was formed by a Student's Union Vice President to collate the feedback provided by students and produce a report for the University. This report recommends updates to the module feedback process and is now under consideration by the University.

STUDENT ONLY SPACES WORKING GROUP

Reps and students can contact one another via the Moodle area managed by the Students' Union called "Student Only Spaces" – a space for open discussion without departmental staff accessing it. Reps reported poor engagement on these forums, and voiced frustrations that more is not done to signpost students to contact their reps via these spaces. It is understood that some improvements need to be made to the functionality in these spaces. The ISS Moodle Team have committed to providing resources to help develop the spaces and will proceed with plans informed by students and Reps. This project is now noted as one of the outcomes of Embrace Digital forward planning.

REP INITIATIVES

USE YOUR REP CAMPAIGN

Reps launched a campaign this year to increase awareness of Reps and get more students to interact with them. During Michaelmas term, a campaign demonstrated some changes reps have contributed to and raised awareness of all the ‘behind-the-scenes’ work they do for students (such as forum attendances and training). We put together a video introducing some of our friendly reps. It also explained how students could contact their Reps, helping to promote the Student Only Spaces on Moodle.

EDI CHAMPIONS

Various Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) projects are being explored within departments and faculties and it is not clear what (if any) student engagement there is within these projects. So, Student Officers initiated a project to appoint temporary ‘EDI Champions’ for each Faculty to identify what projects are underway and map out this information. The results will allow us to identify what gaps there may be in student engagement in these projects and what support or training students may need to engage effectively with projects such as Race Equality Charter and Athena Swan. The results of this mapping is being compiled by our EDI Champions. The Union hopes to work with the University to ensure resources can be allocated to ensure appropriate student engagement within these important projects.

EVALUATION OF REMOTE-LEARNER EXPERIENCE CAMPAIGN

Our Faculty Reps created a campaign in response to the new online/ blended teaching methods to evaluate the student experience. The project aims to review the academic experience and highlight priorities for future consideration. Priority interests include using blended learning as standard practice, maintaining lecture recording and ensuring considerations are still in place to acknowledge the difficulties faced by students beyond pandemic restrictions. The campaign is currently surveying students and will put together a report with results and recommendations to pass on to the University.

IMPROVE YOUR LEARNING

One of our Academic Reps and Students with Disabilities Officer, with the support of VP Education, Reps and students, launched a campaign and report that looked at accessibility issues concerning modes of teaching. This campaign garnered 573 responses across all departments and year groups. It drew key findings such as half of the students with ILSPs being dissatisfied with the current system and reported that only 11% of students consistently get captions in their online teaching. The final report produced recommendations to improve learning at Lancaster that was passed on to the University.

MOODLE BEST PRACTICE

From discussions at student led forums it became clear that students feel dissatisfied with the inconsistencies on Moodle pages. With many students’ citing that local level differences in how departments use the spaces causes confusion and frustration. Faculty Reps initiated a project to identify and collate examples of Moodle best practice. This information was shared with the Moodle Team in ISS to help inform their projects and ISS ran Moodle workshops for staff.

FACULTY TOWN HALL PILOT

Faculty reps in FASS this year have been organising termly ‘Town Hall’ events with reps and senior Faculty Staff. Lead Reps from all departments are invited and are able to provide timely feedback to staff on behalf of the students they represent. Feedback and response from these sessions has been great. It is hoped that other Faculties may also follow suit and that these meeting may continue to build on the strong culture of student-led Faculty forums that already take place each term.

PGT SUPPORT

The issue about lack of support for PGT students was raised by reps at Faculty Forums. A review of how PGT students are supported by academic staff in FST was initiated following suggestions from reps about how the system could be improved. Many department heads suggested that these measures were already in place and were not aware that these roles were not being performed by staff. PGT reps in all Faculties are keen to see what outcomes develop from this review.

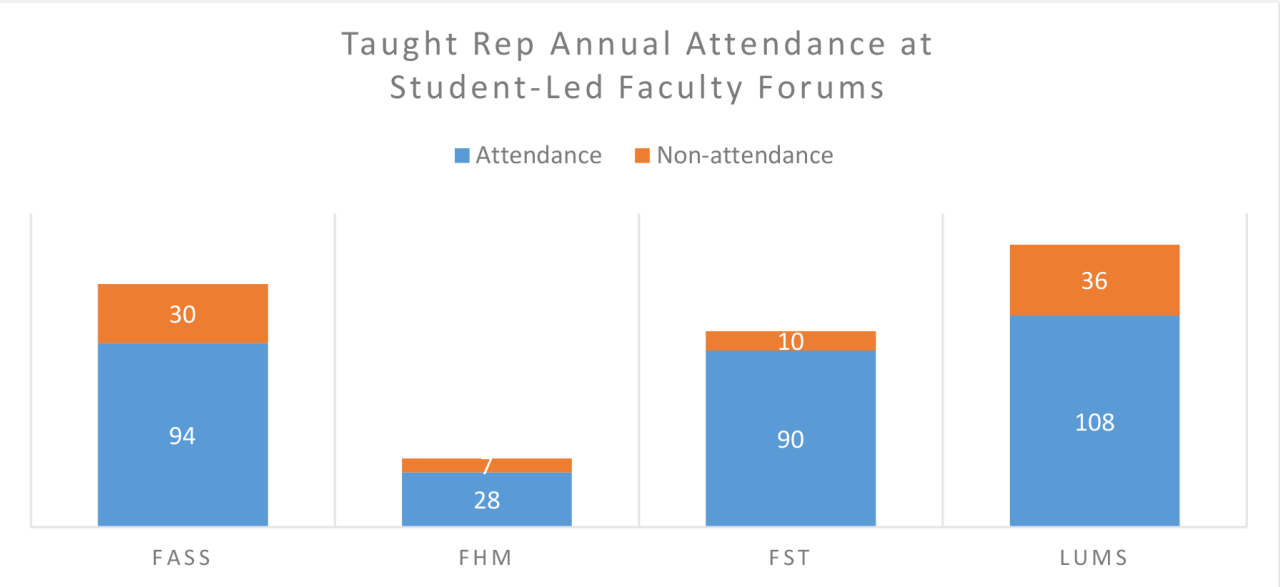
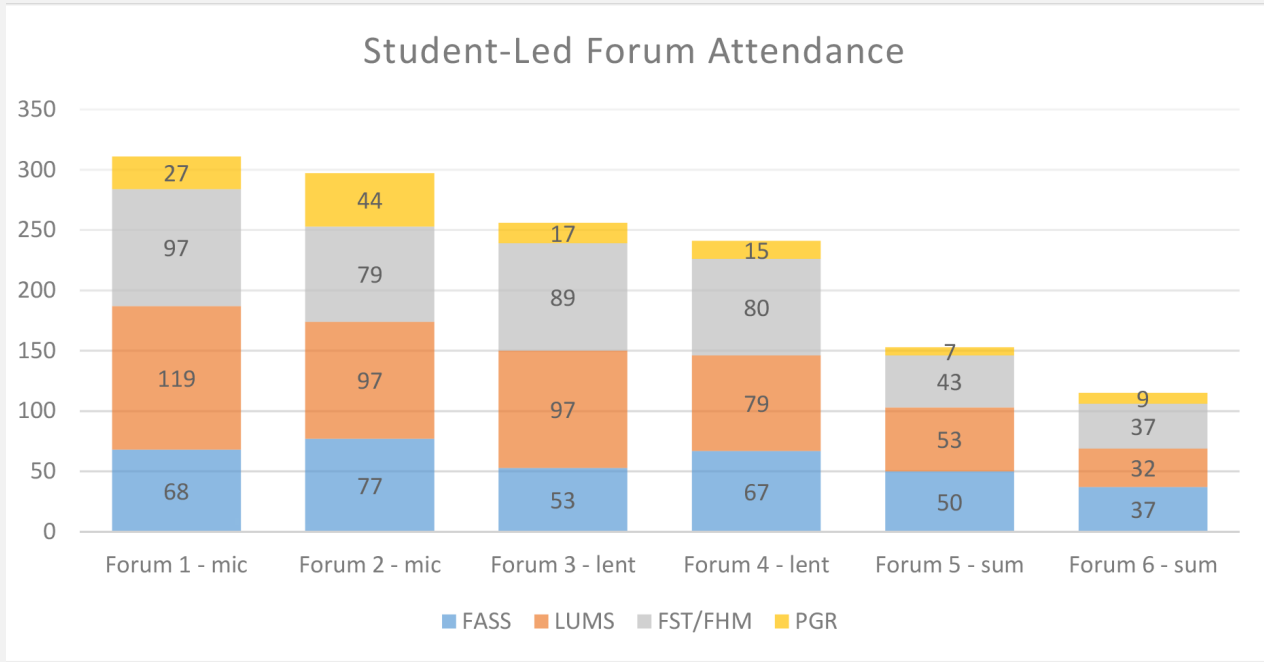
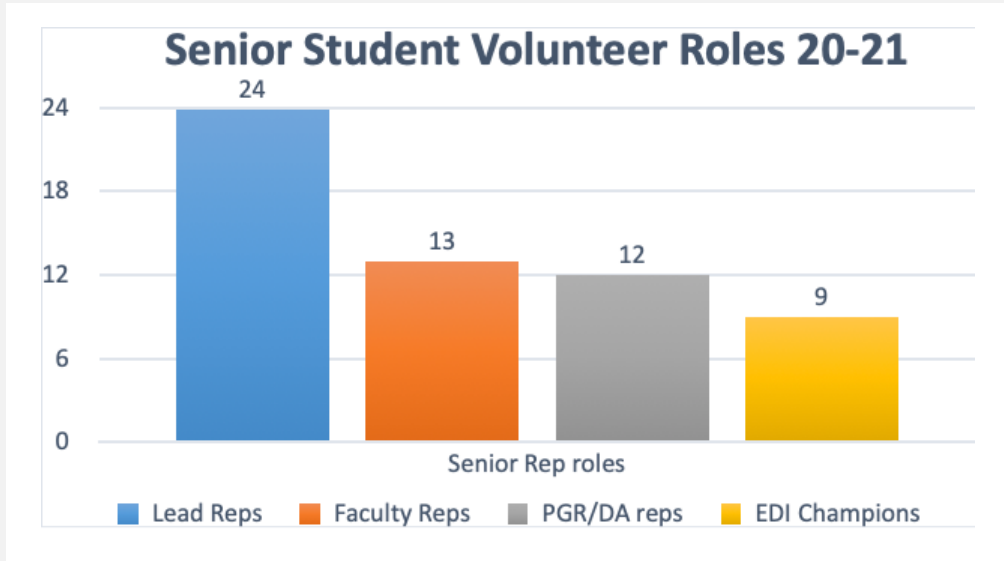
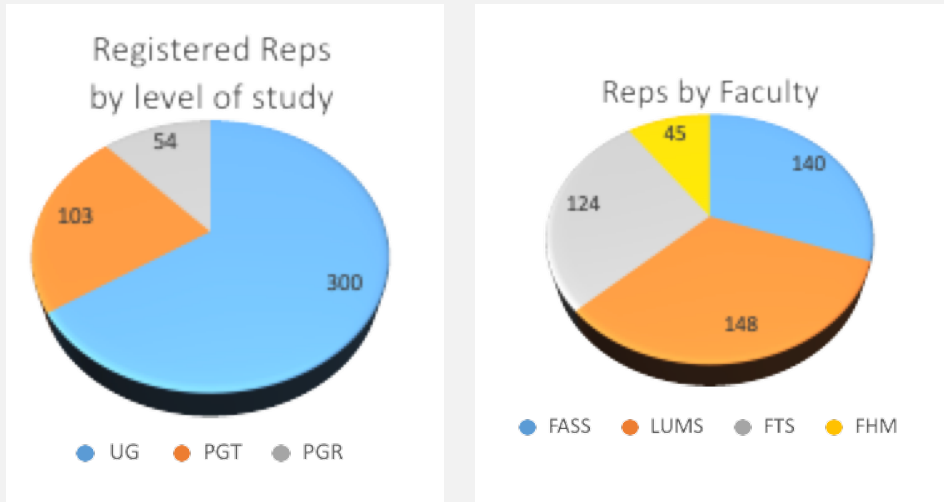
CONTENT WARNINGS

Following rep feedback in Lent term, FASS Faculty Reps worked with Faculty staff to consider how Content Warnings could be implemented in teaching materials. This led to the creation of a Content Warning Policy outline for the Faculty. Content warnings have been a hot topic for students for a number of years. The rapid creation and implementation of a policy directly because of student feedback is an important step toward culture change that will make Lancaster more accessible.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Learning resources should be uploaded at least three working days before the session that they relate to, so students have the appropriate time to engage with the content before teaching.
2. All content should be captioned or have an accessible transcript for students who require this facility.
3. Standardise the Academic Advisor structure, or at least enforce an equitable system, in each Faculty, so all students at Lancaster have the same resources available to them, and no students are put at a disadvantage or offered substandard support.
4. Expand access to ILSPs to include GTAs and other individuals where appropriate with student consent.
5. Enforce the four-week turnaround deadline for graded work, coursework and exams with adequate, personalised written feedback.
6. Increased departmental/faculty/university transparency in communication. Students have repeatedly said that they would rather know that the University is waiting on governmental advice than radio silence.
7. Meet the deadlines set for the release of timetables, both teaching and exams, to allow student to manage their own workloads.
8. Departments should consider programmes for current first (and even second) years to (re)adapt to 'normal' university life.
9. All departments should produce a resource and referral document containing information and links to all the wellbeing resources students might need that year. To include; who to contact in the department, what support services are available within the University and how to access independent advice.
10. Consider ways to standardise and simplify Moodle pages to help make them more user friendly as well as doing more to upskill staff in good practice.
11. Consider the implementation of Trigger Warning policies for teaching materials such as that implemented in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences.

DATA SOURCES & STATS



DATA SOURCE	MEDIUM	PROFILE	RESPONDENTS
Student Faculty Forums	Facilitated discussions	Academic Reps	320
Lead Academic Rep Reports	Report	Academic Reps	30
Improve Your Learning	Survey	All students	573

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