Student Numbers Growth: Size VS Student Experience

Lancaster University has committed to increasing student numbers to a target of 15,000 in their strategic plan by 2020, with no sign of stopping ([Our Strategy for 2020](https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/media/lancaster-university/content-assets/documents/about-us/strategic-plan.pdf)). While the Students’ Union supports the university in their efforts to establish Lancaster as a prestigious place for teaching and learning, it has become increasingly concerned about the rate of rapid growth in recent years. Growth in Lancaster has been uneven, with big postgraduate and international increases that vary across departments, therefore impacts are varied and complex.

This paper sets out the Union policy on space, proposes a boycott of university open days, and invites the Executive to consider extending the boycott to the National Student Survey (NSS) too.

# The Union Believes:

Adverse impacts from increased student population growth include the following: Extended Timetable

Initially this extension was created purely due to lack of space due to expansion.Teaching in the evening has had significant and wide ranging impacts on students and staff:

* Wellbeing - Student and staff work life balance has been altered, particularly for staff and students who commute
* Disabled students - often struggling with getting to campus, this can be particularly hard in the evenings with accessibility and fatigue
* Carers or those with children - have problems with their time commitments and extra expenses for evening child care costs
* Getting involved - university is so much more than a degree, but societies and sports memberships have been severely impacted with late teaching. Students are unable to attend evening activity due to clashing with teaching or tiredness at the end of the day
* Part Time Jobs - university is an expensive time of your life as it is, often casual work starts at this time in the evening so students miss out
* Evening Tests - Larger class sizes have meant space required for big groups is only available beyond 6pm, with students not performing their best so late in the day
* Safe - individuals are out later in the evening when potentially more vulnerable Stretched Space and Physical Resources

Space is the most pressing issue for Lancaster, with the University playing catch up by building new projects to accomodate students like the Health Innovation Campus, 400- seater lecture theatre and library extension. However there are still problems not solved by this:

* New Builds - these are several years before completion and are not adequate for future number changes, continuing in a reactive rather than proactive fashion
* Adequate Rooms - teaching is happening in the Great Hall among other places that are not fit for classes, with students sitting on the floor or unable to see the front. Timetabling has not sufficiently modelled growth.
* Societies and clubs - Room bookings are in short supply, with large annual events (eg Chinese New Year) being uncertain until the last minute as space isn’t confirmed
* Books and laptops - Students have noted resources such as copies of key course texts have not increased in line with demand
* Specialist areas and equipment have not increased - for example, students have to leave computer labs for classes, losing access to specialist software. It is difficult to get staff to cover evening lab sessions, potentially compromising student safety
* Uneven growth - as this differs across departments and undergraduates, postgraduate taught and postgraduate research cohorts,
* Student Community - poor management of the limited on campus accommodation offers this year lead to over first year 300 students living in town with only a one term bus pass free. Students here failed to feel part of their college, an essential part of Lancaster.
* Affordable Student Housing - Increased numbers has meant the limited affordable housing in Lancaster is under extremely high demand, however, there is expected to be a surplus of high end accommodation, effectively pricing students out the market and creating friction with Lancaster residents.

Stretched Staff

Workloads for staff across all sectors of the university are under strain, including postgraduate students who teach. The University and College Union (UCU) strikes in Autumn 2019 highlight this. This impacts individuals wellbeing but also has knockon effects on student experience too:

* Double Teaching - staff who don’t want to teach in the evenings can be forced to split large classes, live stream across rooms or run workshops on a Wednesday afternoon. All of these detract from the fundamentals of valuable learning.
* Graduate teaching assistants - to fill the gap left by academics, postgraduates pick up the slack alongside their research. However, workload is not reflective of fair conditions, leaving markers under high pressure and often with little assistance as how to assess work. This can lead to inconsistent marking and confused students on the receiving end
* Relationships - Staff want to form relationships with their students, but with classes so big, participation is often stifled. Office hours are so congested as staff try to manage their time for students needing assistance, but this leaves little time to form meaningful interactions for both parties. This can be particularly difficult for overworked academic tutors, who, for example could miss vital signs of a student struggling
* Feedback - Staff can’t give students useful feedback on time as class sizes have grown well beyond staff capacity, leaving academics under constant stress and dissatisfied students as seen by the large National Student Survey (NSS) drop in this area
* Counselling and Wellbeing is overloaded - staff numbers have not increased alongside students and mental health issues are increasingly prevalent among young

people. This means frustrated staff struggle to meaningfully support students in the way they want to, and waiting times are only getting longer for those who need help

* Learner Development Support - staff supporting students, especially those who have english as a second language, are increasingly overbooked as they can’t cope with the demand

# We Resolve:

While this list is not exhaustive, it details a significant amount of strain on the student and staff experience here at Lancaster. We believe the efforts the university has put in place to mitigate this have not gone far enough. As a student union, we are concerned that Lancaster is on a tipping point, and if growth continues at this unsustainable rate, this will actively be at the expense of the student experience as shown through the NSS. Therefore we believe in the next few years the institution's reputation and league table rankings will be in jeopardy if something isn’t done to tackle this issue.

* As a student union, we should not be actively committing staff or student time, resources or finances to encourage recruitment of new students to Lancaster University when the capacity is at breaking point:

# The Student Union will boycott open days and applicant visit days aimed to recruit new students until the university commits to sustainable growth.

**Conditions of Boycott:**

The boycott shall be lifted if Lancaster university publicly commits to the following:

1. Student numbers are capped at the current level or lower for the next 3 years. In this period students and staff are openly consulted with around the impacts of growth, creating a new growth plan together for Year 4 and beyond.
2. 6 to 7pm teaching scrapped (within 2 years)
3. Teaching is removed from the great hall (within 2 years)
4. A real commitment to space, where projects are future proof and in anticipation of growth and not in reaction to it. This should include planning for specialist facilities such as labs.
5. First year students are consistently guaranteed a space on campus, even if through clearing.