

Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey Response

2014



Contents

- 03 ▲ Introduction
- 05 ▲ Overall Satisfaction
- 06 ▲ Teaching and Learning
- 08 ▲ Engagement
- 10 ▲ Assessment and Feedback
- 12 ▲ Dissertation and Project
- 14 ▲ Organisation and Management
- 16 ▲ Resources and Services
- 18 ▲ Skills Development

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Introduction

Imperial College Union believes that the student voice should be heard loudly and clearly in debates about improving education, teaching and research at Imperial College London, and that it is our role to amplify and direct that voice. To achieve this, we have established a continuing series of Responses, where the opinions of our members – gathered through national and local surveys and the Academic Representation Network – are projected and publicised to decision-makers in College.



Imperial College London has a large, dynamic and world-renowned base of Master's level courses

In 2013 Imperial College Union published its first Response focused solely on Postgraduate issues, which discussed the results of the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES). This year it is our pleasure to present our Response to its partner survey, the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey. This survey is conducted nationally every two years, and the most recent cycle concluded in June 2014 with 948 Imperial students participating – 31% of all Master's students registered at College. Participation rates were varied across College, but represent a significant increase since 2010, the last time Imperial opted in to PTES, when the participation rate was 21%. As with the 2013 PRES cycle, student participation and



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satisfaction have increased since the previous iteration, and our congratulations go to all academics and professional staff involved in that achievement.

However, the scores were concerning in many respects. With the exception of Resources, Imperial scored below the sector average in all categories, with our Assessment and Feedback scores being amongst the lowest of any institution taking part in the survey. This mirrors longstanding Undergraduate dissatisfaction with feedback as shown by the National Student Survey. Our below-average position against the entire UK HE sector is repeated when comparisons are made solely to Russell Group universities, and to the top quartile of the sector.

A small number of themes emerge multiple times across different sections of the survey, which are arguably manifestations of deeper issues that confront students and degrade the quality of their educational experience at Imperial. Mentions of coursework overload, stress and lack of small-group contact time with lecturers appear in several sections,

but have root causes in common. Issues of poor teaching material, patchy learning resources online and variability in quality between modules are also intimately linked. It is also indicated in the comments that the lack of reliable, recurrent methods to give constructive feedback and criticism to course coordinators and conveners – crucially, with results demonstrated in the same academic year – can feed dissatisfaction and leave issues unresolved from one year to the next.

Imperial College London has a large, dynamic and world-renowned base of Master's level courses, each of which plays an important role in College's mission of producing the next generation of scientists and academics. However, if we aspire to offer world-class education and research opportunities to prospective Master's students, we must actively build upon this base and solve the widespread issues – particularly centring on feedback – highlighted in the results of this survey.

Overall Satisfaction



College Satisfaction Rating

Best Practice:

NHLI, Civil Engineering, Materials

Teaching and Learning



77%

College Satisfaction Rating

Best Practice:

Surgery & Cancer, Physics, Earth Science & Engineering

Recommendation

For College, Learning & Development Centre and Imperial College Union to collaborate in maximising the impact of the STAR Framework, the Student Academic Choice Awards, and other schemes in improving teaching quality and paths to teaching excellence.

Recommendation

For College and departments to ensure effective, regular staff-student discussion structures that adequately serve all Master's courses, in collaboration with the Academic Representation Network.



Staff and student time is very limited. Workshop in all modules would be very advantageous and insightful.



First class teaching quality. All lecturers transfer their passion to the students.



Imperial College London is a very stimulating environment to be in. Staff and students alike are a collection of driven individuals, that encourage everyone to embrace the learning environment.



No contact time between lecturers and students outside of lectures.



Small group teaching is not provided and I have only had 1 problems class this year, in which practice questions could be tried.



I would enjoy having some tutorials or workshops to support my research.

Students are still not getting quality teaching across the board. Students recognise the great teaching that does go on, but many still receive teaching below the level expected from a top institution like Imperial. One bad teaching experience can affect a student's impression of Imperial.

We welcome the College's continuing efforts to reward and develop the teaching skills of its academics, including the STAR Framework,

and encourage departments to incentivise their academics to enrol on these courses and engage with students about the quality of their teaching. In departments with several Master's courses and research groups, there can be insufficient time and space dedicated to open discussions with elected student representatives about the progress and delivery of the course so far.

Engagement



77%

College Satisfaction Rating

Best Practice:

Surgery & Cancer, Chemistry,
Business School

Recommendation

For courses to offer opportunities for in-year evaluations of course content and quality.

Students commented that they wanted to leave overall module feedback after exams rather than after lectures have finished. Others commented they wanted opportunities to give feedback during the course, as by the end of the course it's too late. We are aware that many small Master's courses have longstanding feedback methods that are not formalised into staff-student committees, but these must be externally reviewed for effectiveness; one student reported that their only structured opportunity to give feedback

all year was a five minute face to face meeting with the course organiser.

The one-year nature of Master's courses should not be a barrier to in-year continuous improvement and open discussions with students about how a course or module could be better organised or delivered. Ongoing conversations about course delivery are markers of a high quality academic environment, not of poor quality.



Imperial needs to review workload for student motivation and health.



My concern is that my results will reflect more my depleted energy levels than my understanding of Physics.



I would enjoy having some tutorials or workshops to support my research.



Insufficient time allocated for deeper understanding. I only had a chance to do this before exams, but I would have liked to gain this as we went along.



Since coming to Imperial College I am extremely stressed out, which has impacted my health and life quality.



I want to learn for pleasure not fear.

Recommendation

For courses to declare a timetable at the beginning of the course, or the beginning of the term.

Many students reported unclear and changing timetables, with lectures missed or cancelled due to poor communication. This made it difficult for students to plan research, travel, coursework or revision.

Recommendation

For courses to review workload, including volume, deadlines and the distribution of work throughout the year.

As seen in Undergraduate departments, many students feel that the sheer volume of coursework they are allocated detracts from its educational value and impacts their physical and mental health.

Deadlines should be monitored and the channels through which students may communicate to their department (for example, through Academic Representatives or Postgraduate Tutors) should be clarified.

Assessment and Feedback



580%

College Satisfaction Rating

Best Practice:

Chemistry, Life Sciences, Physics

Recommendation

For departments to issue clear guidelines to different types of assessment, including marking criteria and rubrics.

Satisfaction levels with Assessment & Feedback at Imperial are amongst the worst in the UK; a student opinion held in common with Undergraduates, and a regular feature of student surveys and conversations with Academic Representatives. The national average was 72%, but the College average was much lower at 58%. Coursework is of no

value to either teacher or student if marking criteria are unclear, format expectations are not expressed and feedback is not given in a timely manner.

Expectations should be made clear from the beginning; such as information about marking and when results will be released.



Expectations of my project weren't made clear. My viva examiner said these errors have been made in previous years, so you'd think that the course leaders would have done something about it.



Class participation grades were unclear. I actively participated in the class but I got a D. I still haven't had a response to my query!



We do not receive feedback on grades for one assignment prior to the next assignment being due, which prevents opportunity for improvement.



We never had feedback or solutions after submitting our first coursework, so I didn't know whether I was going in the right direction.



Feedback on my work has almost always been given many weeks after submission, so it isn't useful anymore.



Marking criteria has not been given in advance in most areas, and written feedback is rare for assessed work.



Details regarding the dates we'll get our grades is blurry.

Recommendation

For clear standards to be set on the compulsory return of feedback before the submission date of the next piece of coursework.

This section had the lowest number of positive responses, and these scores are not compatible with Imperial's status and the expectations its students hold. The academic and educational value of formative feedback must be recognised for all study types and a culture created that prioritises feedback over volume and intensity of coursework.

Department leaders should make clear to course organisers that a course which cannot offer timely feedback on coursework is, by definition, inadequately constructed and resourced.

Dissertation and Project



77%

College Satisfaction Rating

Best Practice:

Chemistry, Mechanical Engineering,
Physics



I have nobody that is directly supervising me.



We've had very little support in finding a project. We have been told to look at the list used by the undergraduates, and try to find something related to those projects. However, many supervisors don't want MSc students, and many lecturers have not bothered to reply to enquiries from students on my course.

Recommendation

For Master's courses where there is no project list, provide support and assistance to students so they can find a project that suits their skills and through which they can achieve their potential.

Many students were dissatisfied at the level of support available to help them identify a suitable project. It causes stress among students if they do not know where or how to go about looking for a project. As a huge part of all Master's courses, students should be helped to find a project suitable for them.

Recommendation

For courses with projects that require supervision to offer advice to students on how to approach potential supervisors; expectations of a supervisor should also be clarified.

Students reported that they were asked to find supervisors for MSc projects, but academics could be unwilling or unresponsive. While we recognise the importance of student initiative in contacting academics and leading their research, departments should assess the availability of supervisors before requiring students to find them, and offer support to students who are struggling to agree a supervision plan.

Expectations should be set so that students are aware they are responsible for completing and writing their own projects and day to day supervision will not be provided by the supervisor. Supervisors should integrate MSc students into their research group as currently students don't feel like they are a part of the research group.

Recommendation

For departments to ensure they are following College's Good Practice Guidelines for staff-student committees, and ensure their Academic Representatives are adequately supported (with the cooperation of Imperial College Union).

The size, frequency and responsibilities of staff-student committees (SSCs) varies widely across departments. The established Good Practice guidelines, and best practice in Undergraduate SSCs, provides a good model for holding frequent, short and efficient SSCs that cover an appropriate number of courses and students while remaining effective.

Staff understanding of the role of Academic Representatives remains uneven across Postgraduate courses, particularly in Medicine. Imperial College Union should review its communication to Postgraduate-facing staff to ensure they are able to use their Academic Representatives effectively.

Organisation and Management



720%

College Satisfaction Rating

Best Practice:

National Heart & Lung Institute, Surgery & Cancer, Electrical & Electronic Engineering, Chemistry

Recommendation

For courses to communicate timetable changes and deadline changes clearly, and keep to commitments regarding feedback and marking criteria.

Dissatisfaction with last minute changes is a recurring theme. While room bookings/ location changes can often be unavoidable, changes to assessment deadlines should be a last resort and communicated well in advance, so students know exactly what is happening. Student planning and workload management should be encouraged, and in order for them to manage their time effectively, last minute changes should be minimised and mitigated wherever possible.

Commenters also highlighted their dissatisfaction with being warned about the academic intensity of a course and the importance of hard work, but are then kept waiting for the lecture notes, learning material and formative feedback necessary to such work.



There are often last minute changes to scheduling and un realistically short deadlines given for coursework as a result. Scheduling is often intensive with courses completed over a number of days, or a week, which does not allow time for information to settle in before the next lecture. When last minute changes are made people are supposed to drop other plans at a moment's notice, which is not always possible



Certain changes, particularly to exams, were either not communicated or simply miscommunicated by the courses organisational staff.



I have on six occasions missed a lecture due to rescheduling I knew nothing about. I have also showed up for a couple of lectures that turned out to be cancelled without us being informed. I accept that the schedule made before term might not be possible to keep throughout the semester but I expect a written notice of changes in due time."



Participation in sport is actively discouraged by the lecturers on my course and meetings are scheduled during Wednesday afternoons to prevent us from representing the University. I feel that this takes a lot away from the overall university experience. It is almost as if the lecturers do not understand the need for a good work-life balance

Recommendation

For a College-wide commitment to free Wednesday afternoons for Postgraduates, in recognition of the academic, social and health benefits of work-life

We believe that studying for only one year should not be a barrier to active participation in Imperial's rich student life. It is therefore disappointing that many students are being actively discouraged from engaging in other activities, either directly by staff or indirectly through an environment that frowns upon extra-curricular activities. We want Masters

students to enjoy everything that Imperial has to offer, just like all the other students at Imperial.

Resources and Services



87%

College Satisfaction Rating

Best Practice:

Materials, Chemistry, Chemical Engineering

Recommendation

For future Library redevelopment to include an increase the number of computers and computer spaces, as well as group learning facilities.

Resources & Services is Imperial's strongest section, a result in common with the National Student Survey for several years running. Satisfaction is high and few systemic problems are indicated by the results. However, in line with common Undergraduate complaints, there are mentions of lack of computers at key

times. Courses should mitigate pressure on resources by encouraging forward planning & early submission, as well as endeavouring to minimise peak stress and resource-demand times by distributing deadlines widely.



Services very good including library. Would be good if departmental software could be accessed online from home.



The library is overcrowded, there are never any computers available and is not a comfortable environment to work in. Also, the library is overheated - on numerous occasions during the winter, the temperature has reached 26 degrees C. Not only is this unnecessary but it is a massive waste of energy.

Skills Development



76%

College Satisfaction Rating

Best Practice:

Earth Science & Engineering, National Heart & Lung Institute, Centre for Environmental Policy, Chemistry

Recommendation

For courses to indicate to students the professional and academic skills that will be imparted by each course, and to encourage student reflection on the skills and abilities they have gained.

Several students reported a dip in academic confidence brought on by Master's level study. This was accompanied by a sense that while the subject matter was more complicated than Undergraduate, their practical research skills (from experimentation to drafting papers) were not developing at the same pace.

Courses should allocate space and time to encourage students to reflect on the skills they have learnt, and provide students with the vocabulary to describe their new skills for application in academia.



We weren't taught how to research, write a literature review, write a dissertation etc. I am currently stumbling through my literature review, having read 5 papers, which took me over a week to read. The course feels extremely academic, and I was expecting much more focus on skills for industry. It feels designed for people who want to go into academia, not industry.



If anything then my confidence has decreased. There is practically no feedback and I feel like I have no idea how I am doing - good or bad. The self-study module was very helpful in improving research skills and even though there was practically no support throughout it - I feel like that was part of the experience and I learned a lot.

Recommendation

For departments to encourage the development of academia as well as industry related skills.

A number of respondents reported that their course was excellent preparation for a PhD and that they developed the skills necessary to direct their own research. However, some respondents would have preferred a preparation for a career in industry and therefore learnt the necessary skills. As

part of the regular course review process, all courses should be able to describe how they will encourage independent learning and research skills, including oral presentations, as well as how they will include enough practical elements to prepare the students for a career alternative to academia.

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