

Students more satisfied than ever before 11 September 2008 By [Melanie Newman](#)

Most are happy with teaching but assessment is still a concern, reports Melanie Newman

Overall student satisfaction is higher than ever before, according to the results of the 2008 National Student Survey.

For universities in England, students' overall satisfaction rate rose slightly from 81 per cent last year to 82 per cent, while satisfaction scores in six specific areas, including teaching, assessment and academic support, also all increased.

Students are most satisfied with the teaching they receive, with 83 per cent reporting general satisfaction. But satisfaction with "assessment and feedback" remained lower than in other areas, at 64 per cent.

A total of 149 higher education institutions from across the UK took part in the survey, with almost 210,000 students taking part.

Minister for Students Delyth Morgan said: "The continued high level of satisfaction is a welcome testament to the quality of the teaching and learning experience in this country."

The National Union of Students welcomed the improved scores, but expressed concern that students taking higher education courses in further education colleges were less satisfied than their counterparts studying in universities. Only 58 per cent of students taking higher education courses in further education colleges agreed that their course was well organised and managed, compared with 71 per cent of those studying in universities.

The top UK satisfaction score of 96 per cent went to the University of Buckingham, a private institution. Vice-chancellor Terence Kealey said: "This is the third year that we've come top because we are the only university in Britain that focuses on the student rather than on government or regulatory targets. Every other university should copy us and become independent."

Bishop Grosseteste University College scored 92 per cent, up from 87 per cent in 2007. Principal Muriel Robinson said this was a result of listening to students. "We take what they say very seriously and we act on what we hear," she said.

The University of Sussex was among the most improved institutions, scoring 86 per cent, up from 78 per cent in 2007. Vice-chancellor Michael Farthing said: "We identified the areas in which we were failing - library resources, advice and support to students, feedback - and got staff and students involved in producing action plans."

The GuildHE mission group, representing smaller and specialist higher education institutions, said the results showed that students were happiest when studying in institutions that paid them the most personal attention. Alice Hynes, chief executive

of GuildHE, said common features among nearly all of the institutions with top satisfaction ratings were the presence of a collegiate environment that focused on developing the whole student, and a relatively small size that made it easier to give students personal attention.

As it did last year, the University of the Arts London came bottom of the satisfaction league, with 63 per cent. Will Bridge, deputy rector, said: "The student experience remains at the heart of what we do, and we will continue to work with the Students' Union to identify ways to improve."

Anglia Ruskin University's overall satisfaction rating fell eight percentage points in a year to 66 per cent. Paul McHugh, director of student services, said the university's internal surveys of postgraduate and undergraduate students had "always been at odds with the NSS" but said that this year "the disparity was greater than ever". "For example, 76 per cent of our students would recommend Anglia Ruskin to a friend while only 6 per cent would definitely not; these figures are a puzzlingly long way from the NSS's overall satisfaction score," he said.

Southampton Solent University's overall score fell from 76 per cent in 2007 to 68 per cent. A spokesperson said: "At a time when the university's courses are more popular than ever and graduate employment is at an all-time high, we are surprised and disappointed at our NSS score. We have no immediate explanation but we take our students' feedback - and the quality of their experience with us - very seriously and we will be looking into the matter."

Ruth Farwell, vice-chancellor of Bucks New University, which had a satisfaction rating of 68 per cent, said that some scores for teaching in specific departments were very high, but added: "We actively encourage critical debate ... and have not sought to influence the feedback given by students. We have had the university title for less than a year, and are part-way through a major campus redevelopment project. We are convinced that the changes will have a significant impact on student satisfaction in future years."

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| Most-satisfied students | | | | |
|----------------------------|------|------|------|------|
| Institution | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 |
| University of Buckingham | | 94 | 93 | 96 |
| Royal Academy of Music | 95 | 81 | 90 | 94 |
| The Open University | 95 | 95 | 95 | 94 |
| University of St Andrews | | 92 | 94 | 93 |
| Courtauld Institute of Art | 100 | 81 | 74 | 93 |
| University of Cambridge | | | | 93 |
| University of Oxford | | | 92 | 92 |

| | | | | |
|---|----|----|----|----|
| University of East Anglia | 88 | 89 | 89 | 92 |
| Birkbeck, University of London | 90 | 91 | 92 | 92 |
| Bishop Grosseteste University College Lincoln | 88 | 89 | 87 | 92 |
| University of Leicester | 89 | 89 | 90 | 92 |
| University of Exeter | 86 | 85 | 91 | 91 |
| University of Aberdeen | | | 88 | 91 |
| Loughborough University | 88 | 88 | 89 | 91 |
| Harper Adams University College | 90 | 86 | 91 | 90 |
| Aberystwyth University | 87 | 90 | 90 | 90 |
| St George's Hospital Medical School | 86 | 80 | 87 | 90 |
| Institute of Education | 83 | | 80 | 90 |
| University of Kent | 86 | 86 | 88 | 90 |
| University of Sheffield | 86 | 84 | 87 | 89 |

The tables show the percentage of students, full and part time, who “definitely” or “mostly” agreed with the statement: “Overall, I am satisfied with the quality of my course.”

| Least-satisfied students | | | | |
|--|------|------|------|------|
| Institution | 2005 | 2006 | 2007 | 2008 |
| University of the Arts London | | 63 | 64 | 63 |
| Anglia Ruskin University | 78 | 75 | 74 | 66 |
| University College for the Creative Arts | 66 | 65 | 65 | 67 |
| Leeds College of Music | | 0 | 53 | 68 |
| Southampton Solent University | | 72 | 76 | 68 |
| Bucks New University | 71 | 73 | 68 | 68 |
| Leeds Metropolitan University | 75 | 72 | 68 | 70 |
| Writtle College | | 81 | 77 | 71 |
| London Metropolitan University | | 67 | 70 | 72 |
| University of East London | | | 76 | 73 |
| University of Westminster | 74 | 74 | 74 | 73 |
| Birmingham City University | 72 | 76 | 74 | 74 |
| Liverpool Institute for Performing Arts | | | | 75 |

| | | | | |
|------------------------------------|----|----|----|----|
| Thames Valley University | | 67 | 73 | 75 |
| Manchester Metropolitan University | 76 | 74 | 78 | 75 |
| London South Bank University | | | 80 | 75 |
| Middlesex University | 68 | 72 | 72 | 75 |
| University of Huddersfield | 83 | 80 | 75 | 76 |
| University of Wales, Newport | 80 | 78 | 73 | 76 |
| University College Falmouth | 79 | 69 | 78 | 76 |

To allow a comparison with previous years, only the responses of students actually taught in the institutions concerned are included. Those taking the institutions' courses, but registered at partner further education colleges, are not included. NHS students are not included. See www.hefce.ac.uk/learning/nss/data/2008

| How students rated specific areas in England | | |
|--|---------------------------------|----------|
| | 2007 NSS | 2008 NSS |
| | % reporting satisfaction | |
| The teaching on my course | 82 | 83 |
| Assessment and feedback | 62 | 64 |
| Academic support | 71 | 73 |
| Organisation and management | 71 | 73 |
| Learning resources | 80 | 81 |
| Personal development | 77 | 78 |
| Overall satisfaction | 81 | 82 |

FOREIGNERS FLOCK TO STUDY IN UK

The UK continues to be an attractive destination for foreign students and is second only to the United States overall, says the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) annual Education at a Glance report.

The UK has the sixth-highest number of science graduates per 100,000 employed in the 25-34 age group, ahead of Germany and Japan.

The UK's high degree-completion rate resulted in a supply of graduates above the OECD average, despite average levels of enrolment.

The OECD reports that the UK is unusual in that the proportion of new higher education entrants is highest in humanities, art and education. In most countries, the majority of students study social sciences, law and business.

Universities UK, however, said the report showed that the UK remains below average for public investment in higher education, investing 0.9 per cent of gross domestic product.

Cryptic feedback baffles students

18 September 2008

By **Chloe Stothart**

Those at elite institutions find lecturers' notes less useful than those at post-92s, says Chloe Stothart

Nearly a third of students think that the feedback they get from their lecturers does not tell them how to improve their work, a study has found.

Many students surveyed said they were confused and frustrated by "cryptic" feedback that posed questions but did not tell them where they had gone wrong in their work.

The study for the National Union of Students found that students at post-1992 institutions tended to be happier with the quality of their feedback because they felt it was tailored to them and related better to the marking criteria.

Students at the elite, research-led Russell Group universities found their feedback less useful.

Aaron Porter, vice-president for higher education at the NUS, said the results were "worrying".

Only a quarter of students got verbal feedback yet nearly three quarters wanted it. The students commented that they needed a good relationship with their tutor to get verbal help but such relationships were rare. The number of students getting verbal feedback was lowest at Russell Group universities.

Mr Porter said: "If you are seeing staff for one or two hours a week then there isn't the time to develop the relationship. It is not about the relationship being bad; more that students feel they do not get the contact time to develop a meaningful relationship."

A quarter of students said it took more than five weeks for them to get feedback on their work, but 55 per cent got their work back within four weeks. More than 60 per cent said the timing of the feedback met their expectations.

Mr Porter said that Northumbria University had seen its National Student Survey rating for "assessment and feedback" rise by 9 percentage points after providing guidelines to staff on how to provide feedback and to students on how to make better use of it.

The NUS produced a guide on giving feedback and Mr Porter said it should be included in inductions for academics.

David Nichol, deputy director of the Centre for Academic Practice and Learning Enhancement at the University of Strathclyde, said that high student numbers made it difficult to provide the level of verbal feedback and dialogue that was a given when there were fewer students. However, a purpose of higher education should be to make students better at self-assessment, so they should review each other's work under the guidance of a tutor, he said.

Wendy Piatt, director-general of the Russell Group, said Russell Group institutions provided more contact hours than the sector average, and improving feedback was one of its goals.

She added: "Improvements are already showing; for example recent studies found that 82 per cent of international students at Russell Group universities were satisfied with their performance feedback. Nevertheless, continual improvements will require a long-term investment, the benefits of which will appear over time."

More than 3,000 students completed online questionnaires or took part in focus groups for the NUS study.

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BAD FEEDBACK

- "Don't do what I told you to do a week ago (and what you've spent the past week doing). Start again from the beginning."
- "No, that's all wrong."
- "You really have chosen the wrong career."

As reported by students.

Buckingham tops national student survey

A total of 95.8% of Buckingham students tell the National Student Survey they were satisfied with their course

- [Jessica Shepherd](#)
- guardian.co.uk,
- Thursday September 11 2008 09:42 BST

The UK's only private university and the one with the fewest students topped a poll for student satisfaction today.

The University of Buckingham, which at under 1,000 students is one tenth the size of the average UK university, has the most satisfied students.

Some 95.8% of Buckingham's students told the National Student Survey they were satisfied with their course.

The university charges double the tuition fees of ordinary universities at just over £6,000, but many complete their degrees in two, rather than three years.

Almost 220,000 final-year students in 267 colleges and universities rated how happy they were with their courses.

This year's survey has been mired by allegations that tutors are bullying students into rating their courses highly.

In May, two psychology lecturers at Kingston University were secretly recorded urging undergraduates to give Kingston a glowing report.

More than 100 students were told by one of the lecturers that their degrees would be "shit" unless the university did well.

In this year's poll, the least satisfied were students at the University of the Arts London, which is the amalgamation of six art and design colleges and Europe's largest centre for the study of art, design, fashion, communication and the performing arts.

A total of 62.6% of the university's students said they were satisfied with their courses.

Small universities and colleges dominated the top ten positions with the Royal Academy of Music in second place and the University of St Andrews in fourth.

The Open University, which last year took the top spot, came third. Cambridge University narrowly beat Oxford University to sixth place with 92.5% of its students satisfied compared with 92.2% at Oxford.

Students studying geology, Asian and African languages and molecular biology were most content with their courses across all universities and colleges.

Those taking cinematics and photography; business and administrative studies and art, drama and dance were the least happy with their choices.

Overall in England, 82% of students said they were satisfied, a one percentage point increase on last year. In Scotland, 86% were happy, while in Wales and Northern Ireland 83% were.

Students were least happy with the feedback they received from tutors. Nearly half the students in England - 44% - told the survey feedback had not been prompt and did not help their studies.

Professor Terence Kealey, vice-chancellor of Buckingham, said his university was the only in Britain to work solely for students.

"The others are working to government targets," he said.

"It is no coincidence that a private university has come top," he said. "The best universities in the world, the Ivy League and the liberal arts colleges in the US are private."

Dr Will Bridge, deputy rector of the University of the Arts London, said: "We have taken many positive steps to improve satisfaction. It will take time before they are reflected in the responses of final-year undergraduates."

Today's poll comes after the head of Cambridge University yesterday attacked "meddling" ministers for dumping universities with the problem of social mobility.

Professor Alison Richard told UK university heads that she was fed up with government viewing universities as "engines for promoting social justice".

Ministers have repeatedly demanded elite universities recruit more students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds to diversify their mix.

But Richard, in her speech to the annual conference of vice-chancellors, argued that this was not universities' chief aim.

From [The Sunday Times](#)

September 20, 2008

National Student Survey results will lift standards
**Don't choose your university solely on the basis of where students are happiest,
warns Alastair McCall**

The findings of the fourth national student survey (NSS) published this month will be used to drive up academic standards in universities.

The pledge comes from Professor Michael Arthur, chairman of the survey's steering group and the vice-chancellor at Leeds University, in the wake of publication of the results from 220,000 final-year students.

More students contributed to this year's survey than any of the previous three. For the first time, all universities taking part achieved the 50% response rate required for their data to be released. And all seven categories of the 22-question survey showed overall satisfaction levels up by 1%-2%.

The NSS was introduced in 2005 shortly after the individual subject review programme — where academics rated their peers — was discontinued. "Vice-chancellors are taking the results very seriously," says Arthur. "They all have action plans related to the outcomes, so the quality enhancement aspect of the NSS is very important. It's working better than subject review in that respect."

- [Sunday Times University Guide table](#)
- [National Student Survey results](#)

Even this year's student assessment and feedback section saw scores climb from 62% to 64% overall, although it remains well behind all other sections of the survey, some of which gained satisfaction ratings 20% higher. "It shows that we need to work very much harder on assessment and feedback, as it still lags behind. But it is improving," says Arthur.

Publication of the results followed a difficult year for the NSS with repeated allegations of attempts to influence the findings by university staff eager to avoid poor ratings. "The integrity of the data is crucial," Arthur warns. Where university departments are deemed to have interfered with the survey's findings, data for the department concerned will be suppressed from the NSS, he says.

As the NSS slowly replaces (the still useful) subject reviews carried out by the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (www.qaa.ac.uk) in our league table, its greater influence can be seen in the rankings. St Andrews, Exeter and Leicester are all riding high at least in part because of exceptional scores in the NSS.

Imperial and LSE lie in third and fourth places in spite of poor NSS scores, which ranks them 97th and 107th respectively for student satisfaction. Manchester, Edinburgh and Bristol (ranked 103rd, 105th and 108th respectively) all fall in our overall table off the back of poor satisfaction scores.

So a word of caution: don't choose your university solely on the basis of whose students seem happiest. Overall scores can be misleading; much more useful are the individual subject scores, detailed on pages 58-63 of this guide. For example, biology students at Bristol give a 79% satisfaction rating compared with 62% for politics. Subject ratings show real differences in perceived quality within the same institution, regardless of its overall score.

Barry Taylor, director of communications at the University of Bristol, gets it about right. "The NSS is a good and useful thing, but the results should be handled with care. "For example, students at leading institutions may be especially aspirational. Such characteristics probably helped them get in. They set the benchmark high for others as well as themselves — and rightly so.

"It's best to see the NSS, like league tables, as an indicator, rather than the be-all and end-all. It should be considered alongside insights that can be gleaned from visits, guides, online social networks and so forth."

From **The Sunday Times**

September 21, 2008

Elite universities fail the test of student happiness

Alistair McCall and Jack Grimston

SOME of Britain's most prestigious universities have the unhappiest students, with widespread dissatisfaction over poor teaching and lack of support from staff, according to a new league table based on official figures.

Bristol, Edinburgh, Imperial College London, the London School of Economics (LSE) and Manchester are all among the bottom 25 universities for student satisfaction, despite achieving high overall rankings in the new Sunday Times University Guide league table.

Experts believe that many universities, particularly the biggest ones in cities, have expanded so quickly and place so much emphasis on research that undergraduate teaching has suffered.

"The key thing is the amount of personal attention students get," said Alan Smithers, director of the centre for education research at Buckingham University, a private institution ranked first in the satisfaction league table. "The model of the British university system is self-motivated students learning from the experts in their field. That has been maintained at the top of the table where institutions are small, or offer a high staff-to-student ratio or a tutorial system.

"The institutions that do least well on satisfaction are large. Researchers are busy doing their excellent research and building their university's reputation - that may mean cutbacks for teaching, particularly tutorials."

Buckingham is followed in the satisfaction table by Cambridge, Loughborough, and Harper Adams in Shropshire (which specialises in rural-based studies), after which come Exeter, St Andrews and Oxford. All are either small or - in the case of Cambridge and Oxford - broken down into small colleges, and tend to offer close contact with academics.

The satisfaction rating is based on data from the 22 questions in the government's National Student Survey, which asks 220,000 final-year undergraduates for their assessment of their degree.

Elite universities describe themselves as "research intensive", but the survey suggests this can come at the expense of teaching undergraduates.

Imperial, third in the overall Sunday Times league table, falls to equal 97th out of 119 in the student satisfaction table, and Bristol from 16 to 108.

Universities which did poorly on satisfaction said they took the findings seriously.

Janet Hartley, pro-director for teaching at the LSE, fourth overall but 107th on satisfaction, said: "LSE scores well in organisation and management but we have work to do in several other areas." Colin Stirling, vice-president for teaching at Manchester - 21 in the league table but 103rd for satisfaction - said: "Improvements are required, especially in assessment and feedback. We are committed to excellence in teaching."

Overall, the most satisfied students on any course in Britain were studying finance and accounting at Exeter, which scored 96.2%. This was more than double the satisfaction levels for the lowest ranked - social work degrees at Swansea, Brunel and Royal Holloway, London.

