

Royal Holloway Students' Union Department Rep Briefing

Department: Biological Sciences

For the Academic year: 2025-26

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Background

Department briefings are prepared annually, collating the data from the Staff-Student Action Meeting (SSAM) and the outcomes of the National Student Survey (NSS). The briefing aims to give an understanding of the student opinions of the activities within the department.

Commentary

The following data is a summary of some of the key themes discussed in the 'Negative' and 'Positive' student responses to the NSS survey open-text question, 'Looking back on your experience, are there any particularly positive or negative aspects you would like to highlight?' Comments have been cross-referenced with minutes from the SSAMs which ran during the same academic year. Any topic solely discussed during SSAMs and not in the NSS have been clearly identified in the table as (SSAM).

Students from this cohort experienced a marking and assessment boycott in their first year of study as well as disruptions from UCU strike action that year. These incidents could have an impact on the NSS scores for this cohort of students.

Key Themes	Commentary	
	Things working well	Areas for improvement
Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Great opportunities to develop relationships with course mates 	
Facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Hands on experience through fieldtrips 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> University facilities cannot accommodate number of students Conditions of buildings unsafe Difficulty in understanding textbooks (SSAMs)
Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interesting and engaging delivery of content Resources easy to follow Labs useful 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Too much content included in lectures Lecturers read from slides Want seminars to discuss content Unmanageable workload (SSAMs) Lectures can be hard to follow (SSAMs)

Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assessment briefs helpful ▪ In-class quizzes helpful to consolidate knowledge ▪ Information given on marking of exams 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Assessment feedback is brief ▪ Third-year project poorly organised ▪ Increase weight of coursework and reduce weight of exams ▪ Online exams have been removed ▪ Lack of feedback and guidance on lab reports (SSAMs) ▪ Confusion about content of exams (SSAMs) ▪ Issues flagged with printed exam papers (SSAMs)
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Student feedback taken onboard ▪ Easy to contact teaching staff 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Unclear instructions for completing coursework ▪ Lecturers slow to reply to emails ▪ Student feedback poorly acted upon ▪ Inconsistent expectations on coursework and assessment formatting
Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Staff supportive and friendly ▪ Staff answer questions well 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Some staff rude and dismissive

NSS

The National Student Survey (NSS) is a nation-wide survey of all final year undergraduate students studying at institutions across the UK and is managed by the Office for Students (OfS). The survey has run on annual basis since 2005. In 2020 the OfS undertook a significant review of the survey questions with an aim to refresh the NSS with questions that are more direct using positivity measure with a four-point scale to gain more accurate insight into the undergraduate student experience at UK universities.

The NSS 2025 questionnaire had 25 core questions which were grouped into six categories, or scale questions around themes like teaching, resources, academic support and there is a specific question about Students' Unions which is a part of the Student Voice category. Each of the six scale questions are composed of multiple questions which explore various elements of this theme in more detail. There were two additional questions included around mental health and freedom of speech, of which the second was offered only to students in England, and Royal Holloway included these questions in 2024.

Below is a table of the scores the Department received following the NSS 2025. This can help you inform areas that may working on and monitoring. This data can also inform the comments provided above. The term 'positivity measure' means the proportion of respondents who gave a positive answer

		2025	2024
Response Rate (%)		69	76
Questions (% of respondents Positivity Measure)			
1	How good are teaching staff at explaining things?	96	92.86
2	How often do teaching staff make the subject engaging?	80	75
3	How often is the course intellectually stimulating?	89.20	88.10
4	How often does your course challenge you to achieve your best work?	90.40	81.93
5	To what extent have you had the chance to explore ideas and concepts in depth?	82.40	84.52
6	How well does your course introduce subjects and skills in a way that builds on what you have already learned?	93.20	84.52
7	To what extent have you had the chance to bring together information and ideas from different topics?	93.20	80.95
8	To what extent does your course have the right balance of directed and independent study?	81.10	70.24
9	How well has your course developed your knowledge and skills that you think you will need for your future?	91.90	80.72
10	How clear were the marking criteria used to assess your work?	74.70	73.81
11	How fair has the marking and assessment been on your course?	85.10	80.95
12	How well have assessments allowed you to demonstrate what you have learned?	82.70	71.43
13	How often have you received assessment feedback on time?	77.30	65.48
14	How often does feedback help you to improve your work?	68.90	67.86
15	How easy was it to contact teaching staff when you needed to?	93.20	90.48
16	How well have teaching staff supported your learning?	90.40	86.90
17	How well organised is your course?	91.90	83.33
18	How well were any changes to teaching on your course communicated?	90.40	80
19	How well have the IT resources and facilities supported your learning?	84.50	91.67
20	How well have the library resources (e.g., books, online services and learning spaces) supported your learning?	84.70	89.16

21	How easy is it to access subject specific resources (e.g., equipment, facilities, software) when you need them?	93.20	87.80
22	To what extent do you get the right opportunities to give feedback on your course?	85.10	83.33
23	To what extent are students' opinions about the course valued by staff?	84.90	80.95
24	How clear is it that students' feedback on the course is acted on?	79.70	68.67
25	How well does the students' union (association or guild) represent students' academic interests?	77.90	79.22
26	How well communicated was information about your university/college's mental wellbeing support services?	77.80	76.25
27	During your studies, how free did you feel to express your ideas, opinions, and beliefs?	93	86.42

NSS Categories (% Positivity Measure)		2025	2024
1	The teaching on my course	88.70	84.52
2	Learning opportunities	88.30	80
3	Assessment and feedback	77.50	71.90
4	Academic support	91.90	86.69
5	Organisation and management	91.20	81.55
6	Learning resources	87.40	89.29
7	Student Voice	83.10	77.78
8	Students' Union	77.90	79.22
9	Mental wellbeing services	77.80	76.25
10	Freedom of expression	93	86.42