

‘Enhancing the Student Experience’

Policy Statement ¹

The 1994 Group

The 1994 Group represents nineteen of the UK’s most research-intensive and internationally renowned universities.² The 1994 Group’s mission is to promote excellence in research and teaching. Seeking to promote excellence in the student experience is therefore at the very heart of what we do. Each member institution delivers an extremely high standard of education to its students, demonstrating excellence in teaching and academic support, and providing learning in a research-rich community. We focus also on extra-curricular activity and we believe that encouraging students to aspire to be their best both academically and in whatever they do outside their study is central to delivering the very best student experience.

¹ The full ‘Enhancing the Student Experience’ Policy Report can be found at:
www.1994group.co.uk/SEPolicyReport

² Members of the 1994 Group are: University of Bath, Birkbeck University of London, Durham University, University of East Anglia, University of Essex, University of Exeter, Goldsmiths University of London, Royal Holloway University of London, Lancaster University, University of Leicester, Loughborough University, Queen Mary University of London, University of Reading, University of St Andrews, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of Surrey, University of Sussex, University of Warwick and University of York.

What is the Student Experience?

1. 'Student Experience' is a wide-ranging term meaning different things to different kinds of students. An 18-year-old undergraduate or foundation degree student, living away from parents for the first time, discovering independence, has a very different experience of university to a 40-year-old masters student, living at home with partner and children, balancing a full-time job with part-time study. In turn, both encounter a vastly different experience to that of a student from China, who is getting to know a new language and culture as well as new learning material. Furthermore, there are many different aspects of university life which affect the experience of students, from the quality of teaching, level of academic support and provision of learning and library space to the opportunities for volunteering, sport and other extra-curricular activities, work-based learning and paid work and access to bars, cafes and other social spaces.
2. In short there are many different student 'experiences' to be found across the spectrum of higher education and even across the same campus. This variation is further increased by the different systems for funding and support found in the UK. Importantly, the school-leaver, the mature student, the international and all other types of student have varying expectations of the experience they hope to receive. In an era of widening participation, varying fee and support structures, rapid globalisation, international competition and technological change, the experiences and expectations of students are changing continuously.
3. The challenge for universities is to keep abreast of the shifting expectations of an increasingly diverse and informed student population and to adjust accordingly to provide the best possible experience to each of them. This is a challenge not only for universities but also for policy-makers and all student-facing groups across the sector if UK HE is to continue to be one of the leading higher education providers in the world. In response to the changing environment of student experiences and expectations, 1994 Group institutions are redefining the roles of students and setting themselves up to give the best

support possible as they live out these various roles at university. In summary, the roles of the modern student include: Learner, Citizen, Colleague, Consumer, Scholar, Ambassador; but perhaps the most important role of all is Partner.

The Role of the 1994 Group's 'Enhancing the Student Experience' project

4. In recognition of this need for focus on the student experience, the 1994 Group initiated its 'Enhancing the Student Experience' project in Summer 2006. This project investigates the key developments regarding aspects of the student experience, drawing on outcomes of the recent increase in information on this issue, and identifies the challenges faced by the sector if we are to meet student expectations. This statement recommends to the sector, funding councils, government and stakeholder bodies the areas of research and activity in which we should engage in order to understand more fully and enhance the student experience.
5. The 1994 Group is an appropriate group to lead this debate, as the student experience is an area in which its members have particular expertise. Three years of the National Student Survey (NSS) have consistently demonstrated that undergraduate students in 1994 Group institutions are extremely satisfied with the experience they receive. An aggregate taken from the three years' results shows that five 1994 Group institutions are ranked in the top six of this table. The Group's average scores are also well above the average for the sector, and indeed the averages of all other university groupings. This national survey data is backed up by institutional surveys of postgraduate student satisfaction and the results of the I-Graduate survey of the international postgraduate and undergraduate experience, which shows significant levels of international student satisfaction in many different areas in comparison to the sector.
6. Complementing the outcomes of these surveys are the results of a unique survey funded by the 1994 Group and conducted by Unions94, students'

union representatives from across the 1994 Group. The results of the Unions94 Survey 2007 provided for the first time a rich and detailed picture of the fundamentally important role that the non-academic aspects of the student experience play in our institutions. The survey suggests an interesting relationship between student engagement in non-academic activity, the provision of high quality teaching and the excellence of the student experience.

A Partnership Approach

7. A key objective throughout this project has been to engage with as many stakeholders as possible in order to broaden the debate, to test conclusions, and to identify work to be taken forward in partnership.

8. A primary focus has been to discuss the issues and challenges directly with students and their representatives, an extremely important approach which has perhaps not been used enough by the sector during this essential debate. The National Union of Students (NUS) has been engaged from an early stage in this project, and has contributed greatly to shaping the report and identifying areas of research and activity on which to work in partnership in the future. Also, in July 2007, the 1994 Group organised a conference at which students' union staff and officers from across the Group, along with NUS representatives, came together to debate the issues and challenges relating to the student experience, to consider outcomes from the Unions94 Survey 2007, to strengthen their networks and to share best practice. The development of a network of partners across the sector, with institutions, students' unions and the NUS at its heart, is essential for meeting the challenges of the future.

9. Furthermore, the Group has engaged with a wide variety of key stakeholders to discuss the student experience and the 'Enhancement' project. In June 2007, the Group brought together for the first time stakeholder groups including government departments, funding councils, policy-makers, business and a range of other HE organisations to debate the core issues emerging

from our research, to shape the final conclusions of the report and to identify areas to take forward in partnership.

REPORT CONCLUSIONS:

A Snapshot of the Student Experience in 2007

10. In its research the Group has sought to understand the complex factors which affect the experience of all types of students in UK Higher Education; to identify the principal challenges faced by the sector if we are to continue to meet student expectations and enhance their experience in the coming years. As noted above, the student experience is such a wide-ranging term, influenced by such a complex variety of factors that it is fruitless to attempt to define it as a single 'thing'. In light of this, a more useful approach to understanding the student experience is to take a 'snapshot', a current view of the various factors affecting students, which draws together recent research and developments, and identifies the challenges for the sector to address. The following factors make up the 1994 Group's snapshot of the student experience in 2007.

11. Higher Education has been undergoing significant changes over the past two decades, and no group has been affected more by these changes than students. International and postgraduate students across the UK have been paying tuition fees since the 1980s, and this was the real beginning of the HE student marketplace. The creation of a marketplace naturally affects the choices students make when they embark on their university life and their expectations of what they should receive. In the UK, the introduction of undergraduate fees in 1997 increased these expectations and they were increased further in England in 2006 under the new system of variable fees for full-time undergraduates. The increasing importance of the 'student voice' is reflected in England by the appointment in October 2007 of the first Minister for Students and the formation of an independent National Student Forum which will advise ministers on student issues.

12. The good news is that students continue to be excited and engaged by higher education and continue to see it as an important stage in their own development. Despite variable fees applications to HE have continued to rise and many recent student surveys have indicated that students are satisfied and engaged with their university life. English institutions, in receipt of variable tuition fees, have launched ambitious investment plans designed to meet the increased expectations of students. This has included enhancing faculty numbers, teaching resources and student accommodation. Institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which have yet to receive the financial investment from fees, have likewise been under increased pressure to improve faculty numbers and physical infrastructure and have responded accordingly. The move to a regulated student marketplace has been a success.
13. However, students find themselves in a swiftly changing environment and the future of higher education contains some large challenges for them and indeed for universities. Institutional investment in student support, scholarships and bursaries to widen participation and to attract the very best students from all backgrounds, places increased expectations on institutions to perform within this new market environment. Universities must also demonstrate continued and strengthened commitment to providing excellent teaching, support and facilities in order to ensure that the experience of university life continues to be as appealing to students as it has been in the past decade. They must achieve this within a relatively constrained funding environment. Furthermore, these funding constraints vary across the UK, with the devolved systems facing similar expectations from students as in England but receiving different levels of resource to meet them.
14. An increasingly competitive employment marketplace is another key factor playing a part in the experience of students. Research reveals that it is employability skills, often obtained outside the academic curriculum through engagement in extra-curricular activity such as volunteering, part-time work, sport, and students' union activity, which are most prized by government and employers, when they are coupled with high academic achievement. This

puts different pressures on students who need to balance these non-academic aspects with academic work. Accordingly, the role of universities is changing in relation to these factors, with many increasingly encouraging and accrediting these extra-curricular activities as an essential part of the student programme.

15. The changing environment of fees and expectations has brought the nature of the relationship between student and university into focus, including an increasing emphasis from some on the idea of students as 'consumers', a notion which should be tempered with the recognition of students' and universities' roles as mutual partners in the development of people's knowledge, skills and experience, in order to shape their contribution to society. The new relationship places an increased responsibility on institutions to work in close partnership with the NUS in recognition of its role as the national voice of students, as well as with local students' unions in their role as the voice of students on campus and providers of many aspects of the non-academic student experience.
16. In recent years there has been increasing availability of information relating to the student experience and a rising level of research into this area. However, our research has revealed that this has clearly not gone far enough and there are gaps to be filled. A wider availability of data relating to the student experience is required alongside a bank of high-level institutional data which will better inform the decisions of prospective students, allowing them to differentiate between various types of institutions in an increasingly diverse sector.

1994 Group: Leading the Student Experience Debate

17. Senior Management Teams at 1994 Group institutions focus a great deal of attention on the student experience and collectively the Group leads the debate and plays a prominent role in raising the issue to the top of the HE agenda. Across the Group there is evidence of excellent provision and support for students relating to both academic and non-academic aspects of

their university life. There is evidence of very high levels of satisfaction amongst the students themselves. The NSS, a survey of final year undergraduates, is one clear example of the 1994 Group's success in this area, as Figures 1 & 2 demonstrate.³

Fig. 1: NSS top six (from 3 year average 2005 – 2007)

	A	B	C	D	E	F		
Institution	Teaching	Assessment and feedback	Academic support	Organisation and management	Learning Resources	Personal development	Average Score (Columns A-F)	Overall satisfaction
1. St Andrews	88	77	83	86	75	84	82	89
2. Oxford	88	76	84	80	94	84	84	88
3. Leicester	85	75	81	82	84	83	82	87
4. Birkbeck	86	76	77	79	77	80	79	86
5. Loughborough	83	75	82	85	87	83	82	85
6. East Anglia	84	74	80	81	85	83	81	85

Fig. 2: NSS results (3 year average 2005-2007)

	A	B	C	D	E	F		
Group	Teaching	Assessment and feedback	Academic support	Organisation and management	Learning Resources	Personal development	Average Score (Columns A-F)	Overall satisfaction
1994 Group	82.2	71.3	77.4	79.3	80.0	80.1	78.4	82.9
Sector	79.9	70.5	75.6	75.0	79.9	80.1	76.9	80.1

18. This is supported by evidence from institutions' surveys of postgraduate student satisfaction and outcomes of the I-Graduate survey of international students' experiences, which covers postgraduate taught and postgraduate research students, as well as undergraduates. International students at 1994 Group universities show high satisfaction in comparison to the sector, particularly in areas relating to student support ranging from assistance with finances and accommodation upon arrival, the support of careers services and graduate schools, the provision of faith and worship facilities, and the activities of the students' union (see Figure 3).⁴

³ Results are a percentage score taken from a five-point scale. NSS results at TQI website: www.tqi.ac.uk

⁴ The "1994" Group results are averages of all responses from the 10 1994 Group institutions in the ISB Autumn Wave 2006. The "ISB" Group results are averages of all responses from the full 42 ISB institutions in the ISB Autumn Wave 2006. Data provided by I-Graduate: <http://www.i-graduate.org/>

Fig. 3: 1994 Group compared to the International Student Barometer, Autumn 2006

Selected Categories	% Satisfied		
	1994	ISB %	ISB +/-
Accommodation Office (on arrival)	75.9%	70.8%	5.1%
Careers Service	82.4%	78.5%	3.9%
Safety	88.8%	85.9%	2.9%
Finance Office (on arrival)	73.4%	70.7%	2.8%
International Office	87.6%	85.1%	2.5%
Counselling	86.4%	84.3%	2.1%
Faith Provision	83.8%	82.2%	1.7%
Students' Union	83.8%	82.1%	1.7%
Graduate School	87.7%	87.1%	0.6%
All Categories	77.5%	76.8%	0.7%

19. The Group's position of leadership in the student experience debate is based upon each member's delivery of a distinctive and desirable student experience, which prepares all students extremely well for their future and towards making a significant contribution to society. The Group's strong position in this area is based on our members' collective commitment to the following key areas.

20. A Shared Community Ethos

There is a distinct sense of community at 1994 Group universities. On average, there are 10,000 students at member institutions, meaning they can operate on a personalised scale. But even our larger institutions apply the principle through very strong levels of student support. Most are campus based, and those that are not aim to create community in their physical environments. They also have excellent relationships with their students' unions, which, according to the Unions94 Survey 2007, are amongst the most active and engaged unions in the country. Overall, there is a real community ethos and willingness to work together to be found across the Group, demonstrated by the many policy and networking groups which meet under the 1994 Group banner.

21. **Production of Exceptionally Employable Graduates**

Through a mix of top-quality academic experience and high level of extra-curricular activity, 1994 Group universities produce very well-rounded and exceptionally employable graduates, at all levels, with a wealth of different experiences and life skills which are applicable and desirable in the workplace. It is extremely important that students are able to engage in the non-academic part of the student experience, even if they are balancing the pressures of part-time work, and 1994 Group institutions have responded by enhancing their provision of protected learning and accreditation schemes for non-academic activity. There is evidence across the Group of high levels of engagement and excellence in sport, volunteering and students' unions societies and governance systems, underpinned by excellent opportunities for work placements and accreditation of employment-related skills.

22. **Partnership of Learners**

1994 Group institutions have an ideal balance between excellence in research and teaching, two areas of activity which are mutually supportive and serve to reinforce each other. Importantly, institutions in the 1994 Group offer their students the opportunity to learn in a research-enriched community. Furthermore, the smaller scale of 1994 Group institutions ensures that knowledge is shared across subject boundaries rather than creating artificial physical or intellectual silos of learning. Across the Group, student-focused estate developments and provision of innovative learning spaces and facilities contribute greatly to providing the most convenient and engaging academic environment to students.

23. **Joined-Up Student Journey**

1994 Group universities engage as much as possible with students at every step on their educational journey, from engagement before and during admissions processes, providing excellent support and experiences during university life, encouraging progression through to postgraduate level, and conducting continued engagement with alumni. Moreover, they are institutions rich in cultural diversity with an international context that permeates all of their activity, and they are flexible institutions that recognise

all levels and modes of study, all of which works to enhance the overall student 'journey'.

Enhancing the Student Experience: Challenges for the Sector, 2007-2012

24. This report has taken a snapshot of the various factors affecting the student experience across the UK sector. It has demonstrated the 1994 Group's particular position within this environment and the willingness of the Group to lead this important ongoing debate. It is now important to identify the challenges that the sector faces in taking forward the enhancement of the student experience over the next five years if UK HE is to retain, refocus and reinforce its world-leading position in this area and to respond to the new directions set out by government.
25. We conclude that there are **seven priority areas** for the sector to take forward if we are to meet the challenges of a changing environment of student experiences and expectations. The 1994 Group has begun detailed discussions with stakeholders to agree how these challenges will be met over the short to medium term. Detailed announcements on this ongoing work will emerge over the coming months. It is essential that the sector and government embrace these challenges and come together to see their implementation.

These **seven priority areas** are:

- 1) **A requirement to provide transparent and accurate information around the student experience**
26. There is a need across the sector for a wider availability of data about the student experience, in order both to better inform the decisions of applicants at all levels, and also to help HEIs identify problem areas and work to enhance aspects of the student experience. Currently, sector agencies

gather datasets on an annual basis, which provide a rich source of information on the nature of the sector, but these are not generally used for these purposes. The 1994 Group will work to ensure that such existing data which can enhance students' and other stakeholders' understanding of the student experience will be made available in an effective way.

27. As the sole national indicator of its kind, the NSS is fundamental to understanding the undergraduate student experience and it must continue. The Group strongly supports the most positive outcome of the NSS, that it has enabled institutions to highlight areas which need attention and allowed them to focus efforts on directly enhancing aspects of the student experience in order to improve student satisfaction. The Group will continue to engage with the NSS steering group to ensure that the survey is developed towards maximum usefulness and is provided to applicants in the most helpful way. Of course, the NSS relates principally to undergraduate students, with also some importance for international students. The Group encourages a similar national survey for postgraduate students as this would also prove extremely useful and important to the sector. Excellent recent examples of what can be done are the launch of the Unistats web service, the reform of the UCAS HE entry tariff and entry profiles, the development of a centralised postgraduate admissions service (UKPASS), and the growing I-Graduate survey into international student expectations and experiences. However, there is a need to enhance these with even more accessibility of information.

2) Towards the 2020 Workforce: Promoting the well-rounded graduate

28. It is fundamental that all graduates across the sector benefit in the best way possible from their higher education experience, and leave university as mature, well-rounded individuals with clearly recognisable skills which will help them in employment. The 1994 Group will strive to achieve recognition amongst the top employers and the sector skills councils for 'well-rounded' graduates who benefit from excellent academic and non-academic experiences, and to ensure that the value of these graduates is understood. In recognition of employer demand for skills obtained outside the academic

curriculum, universities should develop mechanisms to accredit non-academic activities such as volunteering. Also, in recognition of the need for students to support themselves financially while at university, this accreditation should be stretched to include skills obtained during paid employment, perhaps delivered in arrangement between university job shops and employers.

29. The Sainsbury Review⁵ has identified the need for further information to be provided to students and employers around subject trends, graduate jobs and salaries, and subjects which employers and government believe have shortages of graduates with key skills. The review recommends that one way of ensuring data is as accurate and effective as possible is to reform the current 'Destination of Leavers from Higher Education' survey, extending the time period so it tracks graduates three and a half years after leaving university. The 1994 Group will work with HEFCE to see the full implementation of these essential recommendations.

3) Promoting the student voice

30. In a marketplace in which all students are increasingly being viewed, and viewing themselves, as consumers it is extremely important for universities across the sector to make a clear statement on the reciprocal relationship between students and their universities in the development of their knowledge and skills. The 1994 Group clearly supports this principle of partnership and, as part of this, it is engaged in joint activity with the NUS examining the relationship between universities and students' unions. This new approach requires a mature relationship to be developed between HE institutions, the NUS, and local students' unions so that mutual trust can be built up along with the recognition of the need to engage in sometimes challenging debates on these often controversial issues. We strongly believe that more can be achieved in partnership than in conflict and it is essential that the sector and the government promote and listen to the student voice. The creation of an independent National Student Forum and the appointment of Lord Triesman

⁵ Lord Sainsbury of Turville, 'The Race to the Top: A Review of Government's Science and Innovation Policies,' October 2007.

as the first Minister for Students are excellent steps in promoting the voice of English students. Alongside these developments the UK sector, the NUS, and local students' unions must proceed with practical steps to fully promote the student voice and implement a partnership approach to the student experience.

4) Engagement with schools and colleges

31. Effective engagement with schools and colleges is extremely important in efforts to increase and widen participation in higher education. Already, the Prime Minister and the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) have set up a National Council for Educational Excellence to advise how to develop a world-class education system in England for children and young people up to the age of 19 and explore how to link industry, higher education and the voluntary sector more closely to headteachers, teachers and parents. The government has also initiated the new 14-19 curriculum reforms including the new diplomas, which will begin in September 2008. At their heart, the diplomas offer the potential to become a radical alternative to the existing curriculum, and they have been made absolutely central to the reforms of the DCSF. In recognition of this potential the 1994 Group is currently engaged in a joint project with the DCSF to assess the impact of the 14-19 reforms on its member institutions to ensure that students who have taken the new diploma qualifications are able to be welcomed onto degree courses at the full range of universities. The Group will soon be publishing the outcome of this research project, and it intends that outcomes will lead to more engagement from the HE sector in this essential activity.

5) Student-focused resources

32. There is a clear link between levels and quality of support, facilities and resources on offer to students and the levels of satisfaction students have with their experience at university. Enhancing the student experience depends very much on universities understanding the needs of students in relation to the services, support and facilities they can offer, and formulating

strategies in relation to these student-focused resources. Discussions between the 1994 Group and Unions⁹⁴ have highlighted improvements to a university's physical infrastructure as a key area in which to enhance the student experience. Long-term efforts should continue to be made across the sector to make physical infrastructure more student friendly. Student-facing services and facilities should be joined-up and accessible, ideally being housed under one roof or in one area as part of student-focused 'one-stop shops'.

6) International strategy and internationalisation

33. The UK currently has a world-leading position in the education of international students. However, there are clear challenges to this position from established markets in the US, aggressive markets in Australia and in Europe where degrees are now being widely taught in English, and the huge investment in the HE system in China and India which has reduced the number of students from those countries studying overseas. If the UK is to maintain and develop its world-leading position, significant steps will need to be taken. A joined up approach is needed to confront this problem which will involve the sector, government, devolved governments, the British Council, funding agencies and other sector stakeholders. The Group is committed to take forward the development of an international education summit at which these issues can be debated and action agreed. There is a clear need for more availability of up to date information regarding international student admissions and experiences, in order to keep ahead of international trends which may threaten the UK system in the longer-term.

7) Excellence and enhancement in teaching and learning

34. It is important that the learning of students is enriched by the high-quality research around them in the academic community, and that their learning takes place within a truly international context. It is important for universities to keep ahead of student expectations in regards to the teaching and learning they provide, and it is vital to maximise the potential brought by technological advances in their teaching and learning techniques. The NSS and other

student surveys are a key way of gathering feedback from students so the sector can move forward. Students know how they want to be taught and have ideas about how techniques can be improved. They play an important role as 'change agents', challenging the established modes of teaching and learning, and contributing to making it more exciting and relevant for themselves and future generations of students. Universities should increasingly look to provide innovative and well facilitated learning space to provide an engaging academic experience, and must greet the challenge of reaching the best balance of physical and electronic resources they provide to their students.

Reviewing the Challenges

35. As a group we are committed to addressing these challenges and we will be monitoring their impact as we as a sector take them forward. As part of this process we will undertake a similar review in five years time which will set out a view of the student experience in 2012. This will determine the impact of the recommendations we have made in the current report and will set out a further report on student demands for the following five years.

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Student Experience Policy Group**