

During the weeks of 19th October – 25th November 2020, Aston Students' Union Vice President Education Jawad Ahmad, undertook a mass feedback gathering campaign called 'Speak Week'. The aim of 'Speak Week' was to give students an opportunity to provide feedback in a simple and informal manner, to give the Students' union – and in turn the University a better idea of what students' consider important.

Usually, the week is conducted in term 2, however, with the current pandemic and the changes that have been made in learning – we wanted to know how students are feeling and what they would like to change to get a better experience from home.

The feedback was gathered by the Voice department and the Vice President Education. Students were asked to fill out an online form on the SU website with the following questions:

How are you feeling about...?

- The blended approach
- Online lectures
- Available touchpoints
- Travelling to University
- Well-being services.

How has your experience been so far...?

- Excellent
- Very good
- Okay
- Poor
- Very Poor

How can the University/SU improve your experience?

How do you want to receive updated information..

- Instagram
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Newsletter
- Email
- SU Website
- Other (Please Specify)

There were also two sets of options for students to identify themselves as students within ABS, AMS, EAS, LHS or LSS, as well as Undergraduate, Postgraduate Taught and Postgraduate Research.

The question, we asked intentionally allowed students to explain how they felt about certain areas of teaching in TP1 and allowed them to write as much or as little as they liked.

From this we received a total of 400 responses from students.

398 (97.75%) of the respondents were Undergraduate students and 2 (0.5%) were PGT students. No students failed to specify their level of study.

The responses by colleges were as follows:

BSS (Business and Social Sciences): 144 (36%)

EPS (Engineering and Physical Science): 114 (28.5%)

LHS (Life and Health Sciences): 142 (35.5%)

The responses by schools were as follows:

ABS: 118 (29.5%)

LSS: 26 (6.5%)

EAS: 114 (28.5%)

AMS: 11 (2.75%)

LHS: 131 (32.75%)

	BSS	EPS	LHS	Total
UG	142	114	142	398
PGT	2	0	0	2
PGR	0	0	0	0
Unspecified	0	0	0	0
Total	144	114	142	400

To gain a better understanding of how students responded to the campaign, each of the comments were categorised by theme. Nine themes were chosen to group the comments. It was felt that the nine broad themes were specific to Aston students only.

The themes were:

Blended Approach – This was all comments related to the new approach Aston has taken this academic year.

Online Lectures – This allowed students to comment in more detail about the delivery of online lectures and if they are engaging enough the students are getting some sort of experience from home.

Touchpoints – comments about if students feel like touchpoints are working for them and if they are able to attend them.

Travelling to University – comments from students on whether they feel comfortable coming into university to use facilities.

Well – Being Services

Being on campus

Rating of their experience

Communication – suggestions on how students prefer to communicate.

The open-ended nature of the questions had both advantages and disadvantages – our high response rate was undoubtedly due to the informal nature of the exercise. This allowed students to decide on the length of their feedback.

1 – Blended Approach

	BSS	EPS	LHS	All
UG	20.3%	15.8%	15.5%	17.5%
PGT	1.4%	N/A	N/A	0.5%
PGR	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Unspecified	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

There were mixed responses from those who gave their thoughts on the blended approach.

Students expressed their disappointment as many of their modules were being delivered online with no opportunities for them to come onto campus. It was noted this approach is 'heavily online' and this was a common response from students in BSS.

“Disappointed, the information given before the start of term suggested that we would be on campus far more than we actually are. If I had known how little we would be spending on campus, I would have reconsidered moving accommodation in Birmingham.” (UG, BSS)

“Too much online learning causes migraines which makes it difficult to do work all day. I think we need at least one opportunity to go onto campus if we want to a day rather than once a week.” (UG, BSS)

“I think there should be more opportunities to go on campus to learn. The blended approach doesn't work properly as it is majority online which isn't as engaging. The touchpoint sessions are very good and achieve social distancing very well, making these more available to students would increase interaction” (UG, BSS)

Also, there were some similar comments made by students from EPS and LHS, as students were not very happy with this approach. Students explained how their course is essentially online with no blended approach being implemented.

“It's not very blended for my course. Most of it is online and I do not enjoy this very much. I force myself to engage and find it difficult to motivate myself to do anything.” (UG, EPS)

However, there are positives to highlight as students who did comment on this approach found it enjoyable as they were able to fit it in with their daily life. Also, there was positivity around the idea that students had the choice of attending touchpoint sessions and being able to do lectures at their own pace. Students, who did make a comment on the approach understood that this was the most-safest option for students and praised how the university prioritised student safety first.

“I think the blended approach is going quite well. With students being allowed to attend some face to face lectures or practical’s as well as having the opportunity to learn at home, in their own time and at their own pace.” (UG, LHS)

“I feel like it is definitely the most-safest approach at this moment in time as the university is taking into consideration the safety of the students...” (UG, LHS)

“I am really enjoying this as I feel that everything we do is being answered as soon as possible and I feel like I understand my work so much more as I am not rushing to catch up. I am using the suggested timetable provided and it has helped me ensure I keep on top of everything.” (UG, BSS)

“These are very useful and provide flexibility for those you cannot attend lectures.” (UG, EPS)

It should be taken into consideration that many of the students who expressed dissatisfaction were from the BSS College. This was due to the majority of lectures being delivered online with no real opportunity to attend on campus touchpoints. Therefore, students did not think they were receiving the whole blended approach promised by the university. This would differ from LHS and EPS as there would be some sort of compulsory lab sessions students would need to attend as part of their programme.

In our recent Union Council, which was attended by more than 100 students – comments were made that the approach *was not* blended and it was all practically online. Also, comments were made about the overwhelming amount of workload that students have to complete.

2 – Online Lectures

	BSS	EPS	LHS	All
UG	73.9%	70.2%	75.3%	73.3%
PGT	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
PGR	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Unspecified	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

Many of the comments that were made – were in regards to the delivery of the lecture. There were many comments made that they lack engagement and students are not able to concentrate. This has made it difficult for students to learn anything as they do not have the same level of motivation. There were comments made about them being too overwhelming for students as some are required to sit for two hours and listen.

“It is very difficult to concentrate and remain focussed throughout the lectures that are not interactive.” (UG, LHS)

“Difficult to engage with lecturers. I personally find it embarrassing and awkward to raise any questions. Would prefer lectures to be broken up and delivered at different times for instance splitting up 2 hour lectures into 2 x 1hour lectures to allow students more time to understand the content” (UG, EPS)

“It is extremely difficult to stay motivated and self-disciplined whilst staying in your room and following restrictions.” (UG, LHS)

“It’s hard to engage with the content as the pre recorded lectures are long” (UG, BSS)

Long and hard to capture the information. I cannot focus much when I have 3 hrs lectures straight. There is no engagement as well, the lecturer just keeps on speaking. (UG, EPS)

There were a handful of comments made that the lecture recordings from previous years are being used:

“Online lectures haven’t been the best as they are mostly the lectures that were given to previous years. This makes it harder to understand as sometimes the lectures talk about things which may be clearer in real life as they use hand gestures and point to things. Since my course also requires a lot of engagement, I feel due to online lectures there is a gap in this area and I feel worried about the future”

Also, students raised issues regarding staff training in the use of BB Collaborate. As many noticed staff were not aware on how to use the programme and were finding it difficult to navigate. Similar comments were made in our recent union council too.

It should be noted that students do not think break out rooms are effective as many do not engage with these sessions. Students would either put themselves on mute or not say a word until they are brought back to the main session.

“At the start of term it was very clear that staff had received very little or no training on the system so for the first fortnight of teaching lecturers regularly struggled to even host lectures correctly. A notable example was in the first week in which a two hour lecture had 40 minutes of its time wasted trying to get the chat function to work and to display a PowerPoint to display correctly.”

This is something that Aston could fix relatively easily. The university could invest into some time for lecturers to be given opportunities to learn about the functions of BB Collaborate from fellow colleagues. This will ensure lecturers are comfortable using the programme so they are able to deliver highly engaging lectures to students.

These comments can also be related to some of the improvements that were suggested by students in the survey:

- Encourage lecturers to upload asynchronous content earlier
- Encourage lecturers not to read off a screen
- Training for staff on the use of BB
- Include subtitles under recorded lectures
- Include a balance of information and content – so it is not too overwhelming and easy to understand.

However, there were positive comments to highlight as students did think online lectures were a good alternative to in person interaction as they are having better connections with staff and students. Also, those who find it difficult to engage are able to pause and re-watch so they can understand what they are learning from the session. Words such as ‘Good’ and ‘Enjoyable’ were commonly used.

“Excellent - engaging and understanding staff make Online learning as good as it can be” (UG, LHS)

“Good precaution for covid. Teachers have been co-operative trying to engage while teaching. I'm enjoying it so far.” (UG, EPS)

“Good to voice more in lecture questions.” (UG, LHS)

“Enjoyable, similar to previous years, easier to follow than expected” (UG, ABS)

3 – Touchpoints

	BSS	EPS	LHS	All
UG	26%	4.2%	11.4%	14%
PGT	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
PGR	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Unspecified	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A

The most common view on touchpoints was positive. As this gave students a chance to take part in some normal university activities. They saw this as a good opportunity to get to know their lecturers and be able to ask questions directly rather than having to wait. Those that commented on touchpoints expressed how they have been useful for their learning and their overall experience.

“I think that the touchpoints I have been to have been useful. However, it would be good if there were touchpoints for the optional modules.” (UG, BSS)

“Touchpoints are really good” (UG, BSS)

“Really good to get into the uni meet lecturers do tasks with course members and learn in that way. Fell very safe- all positive” (UG, EPS)

“Very useful, should be an opportunity to do some more on campus” (UG, LHS)

Also, there were comments made by students – asking for more to be made available as they felt as if there were not enough and they should be longer. There were some subjects, where no touchpoints were available for their courses.

There would be a relatively simple solution for Aston – as we could look to make more mandatory sessions available for students to come on to campus and interact. Also, this will enhance student experience and ensure students are able to have the opportunity to meet lecturers and other students.

“Sadly not enough of them, they've been useful as you just can't get the same dynamic between participants online.” (UG, BSS)

“These touch points are quite confusing specially the programme level once as I would want to attend them however I am not on campus and they are not recorded” (UG, BSS)

“These are not enough. While it is understandable that safety measures are trying to be met, an interactive classroom (with social distancing) has always been an efficient and encouraging atmosphere to learn” (UG, EPS)

4 – Travelling to University

Those who responded to this section of the survey – it became clear that students were finding it difficult to come onto campus as they were either ‘too nervous’ or a ‘worry’ as many of our students live away from the city. This will require them to take multiple modes of public transport to come onto campus.

Comments were also made about students not wanting to come onto campus as the infection rate is very high and do not want to be a danger to family members who are vulnerable.

“My commute involves the train and walking through the city centre. I am not comfortable with this and so hope not to have to do it.” (UG, BSS)

“Not very easy since I do not drive and cannot take the bus have to take a taxi and it is quite expensive. Especially, when you have to borrow and bring books back! Takes a lot of effort.” (UG, LHS)

“I’m too scared to take public transport” (UG, LHS)

“At this moment of time I try my best not to travel to university due to the higher risk of the virus and due to having a member of my family that is prone to a higher risk of getting the virus” (UG, ABS)

However, a handful of students did not mind travelling to university as this gave them an opportunity to network and just see people in general. Some students were only required to come onto campus once a week so they did not mind this.

“I enjoy travelling to university. It is better than staying at home as it’s harder to get work done. I find it easiest to concentrate in the library or main building. I also enjoy seeing people around me even if we don’t talk” (UG, BSS)

“As aforementioned, more social networking opportunities for general good mental health and stress relief.” (UG, BSS)

“Bus stops right outside the University so is ideal” (UG, EPS)

5 – Being on campus

Many of the views students expressed were positive. As they were very pleased with the facilities that were available to them, such as study spaces, Library and the Students' Union. This has enabled students to feel like things are going back to normal.

“Very appreciative of the SU and library still being open. This has helped to bring back some feeling of normality on campus.” (UG, LHS)

“I love being on campus because of the homely and community feel” (UG, EPS)

There were a handful of comments made by students, who did not feel safe to come onto campus due to the level of uncertainty regarding the virus. Also, students, who did not find it comfortable being on campus find it easier to study at home.

“Not feeling safe, easier to study at home.” (UG, BSS)

“I still don't feel that comfortable to be on campus as there are still many uncertainties as there have been cases of COVID in Universities” (UG, BSS)

6 – Well-being Services

Those, who are aware of the services have expressed they are pleased that they are available. Also, comments were made about the helpful nature of the services that were made available to students.

“Amazing, I contacted the Hub and got lots of helpful advice pretty quickly, as well as them offering to contact external services for me”.

“I like that there's self-help resources and the Togetherall website. There has been lots of signposting to where we can find wellbeing help, including through emails from the university and on Blackboard module pages, which I think is really good. It will be cool to have access to the full Fika App platform as I think Fika is really helpful.”

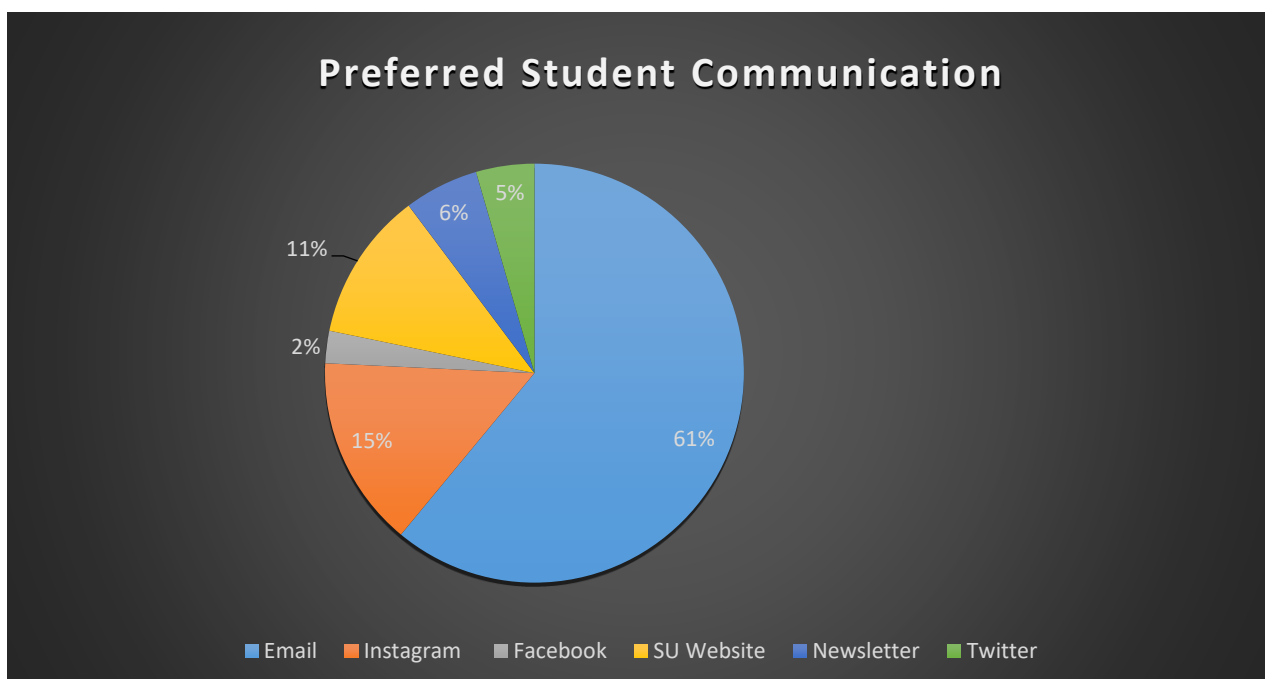
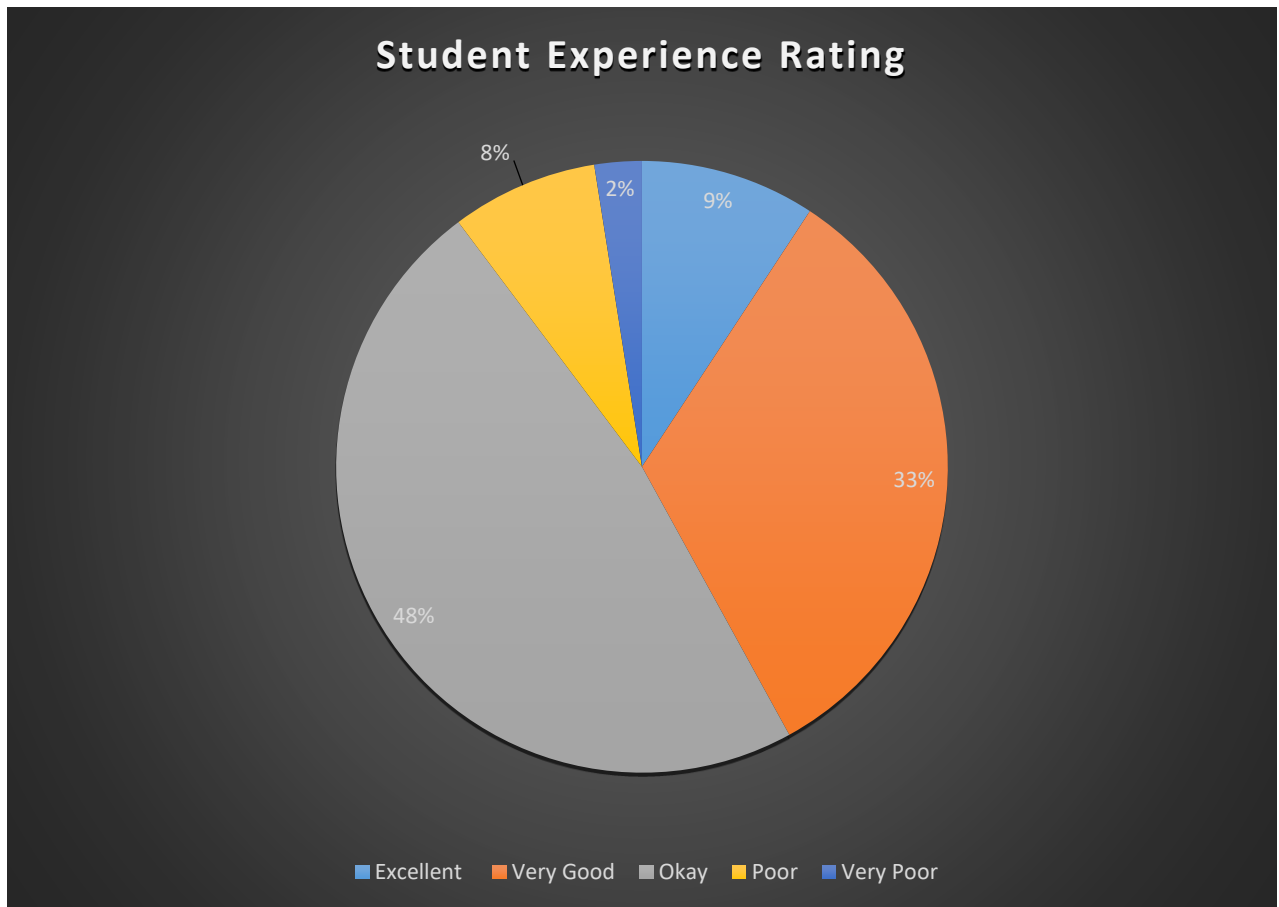
However, those who were not aware of the services – did express that more signposting is required and advertisements about the services that are available to students. As there are students that are not aware of where they can get help from.

7 – Improvements suggested by Students

There were various improvements suggested by students – below are some of the key themes that were identified.

- More contact with personal tutors
- Encourage more engagement in online lectures
- Ensure lecturers are not using previous year lectures.
- Ensure all lecturers are trained on how to use Blackboard.
- More e-books to be made available to students.
- Ensure lectures are being uploaded on time.
- Ensure there is a balance of work set. As this can get to overwhelming for students. Make it clear what is optional and what is compulsory.
- Make more on-campus learning opportunities available to students.
- Subtitles/close caption for students who have hearing difficulties.
- Ensure there is clear communication from the University regarding any updates.
- Keep providing support for students – this can be a difficult period for some.

8 – Student Rating & Communication



Final comments from VPE, Jawad Ahmad

This campaign has yielded useful insights, both for the Students' union and the University. It was a great opportunity within my role as Vice President Education to gain a greater insight and understanding of how students were feeling and what they want to see from the University and Students' Union. During this campaign, students appear to have been honest and have mentioned various changes they believe will improve their learning and teaching experience. Especially during these uncertain times – the student voice is important to ensure the University is delivering the best possible experience for students.

A common response from students was the need of more on-campus activities and seminars. As this will enable students to have some face to face interaction with other students and members of staff. In addition, another common response was the lack of engagement and motivation students were facing on online lectures as there seems to be some simply reading off the slides and not engaging with the students. Also, it should be considered that students do not believe they are receiving the full blended approach as majority of their lectures are online – whilst they only have no touchpoints to two per week.

It should be noted, that in our recent Union Council – comments were made by final year students about their dissatisfaction of online lectures and the lack of engagement. They made comments about how they were not having a good experience and lecturers were not aware on how to use Blackboard.

With the NSS survey – this is something that should be taken into consideration as it shows to us that final year students are showing their dissatisfaction and believe they are not receiving the best of experiences.

My final recommendations for the University is to look into varying their teaching method styles and how they can be applied online. I know this is something that has been discussed previously in ADG. There are already excellent examples of good practise interspersed throughout the university and encouraging colleagues to share this good practise would be favourable. The feedback gathered from students shows there is an appetite for innovative learning styles. For the University to try and increase the number of touchpoints available to students and to ensure lecturers are adequately trained in the use of Blackboard collaborate.

This was an excellent and insightful run of the campaign in the first academic term to get an understanding of how students are feeling about the new learning approach. This goes to show the Students' Union ability to gather huge amounts of data, to empower the voice of understand to show that we value their comments. We will be able to review our approach for the second academic term, including question formatting and other additional information gathering.