

Faculty of Medicine (BMB)

Written by Jai Chapman in collaboration with Imperial College Union

This report presents several recommendations following the National Student Survey (NSS) completed by students graduating in 2020. In total, there were 55 participants in the survey, representing a large number of the total year cohort (60). A meeting was held by the Imperial College Union to discuss NSS departmental recommendations on the 13th of August, and several common themes were identified through multiple departments. For BMB, three main areas have been identified through NSS comments as areas requiring the most improvement.

As this report is based on the first NSS data for BMB, no comparisons with previous years are available. Some key responses indicating significant areas for improvement are highlighted below. These include responses in which agreement from students was found to be below 50%:

Statement	% agreement from students
"The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance"	16.28
"Marking and assessment has been fair"	34.88
"Feedback on my work has been timely"	4.65
"I have received helpful comments on my work"	13.6
"I have received sufficient advice and guidance in relation to my course"	23.26
"Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices on my course"	30.23
"The course is well organised and running smoothly"	9.3
"Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively"	30.23
"Staff value students' views and opinions about the course"	39.53
"It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on"	16.28

From this data, a number of areas are shown to have particularly low student satisfaction. It has been identified that these areas mainly relate to in course assessments, particularly timing and quality of feedback. A large number of students also expressed displeasure with the organisation of the course on a whole.

This was the first NSS response for BMB, meaning that the data likely misrepresents the current feeling of newer students to some degree, as many issues have likely been resolved or acknowledged and worked on since the first cohort of students began their studies. Nevertheless,

there are still several clear areas for improvement that can be tackled in the coming year. It would be beneficial for the student representation team, including myself, and the faculty to work together this year to address the main issues highlighted in this report.

Following are three main recommendations I have devised in order to tackle areas requiring significant improvement, based on a combination of the data presented above, and free text comments left by students completing the NSS. Each of these sections include some suggestions as to how these problems may be addressed in the coming year, based on the discussion held by the Imperial College Union, and my own opinion.

1. Review and Improve Communication Regarding Delays to Assessment Feedback

This recommendation was chosen as a significant number of negative comments from students following the NSS involved delays in feedback for assessments. Students noted that they were frustrated with the lack of transparency regarding when delayed feedback would be released, and that frequent delays were often not met with appropriate explanations as to why the standard two-week deadline could not be met.

Quotes from students:

“For late feedback, delays in marking and insufficient feedback excuses are always made and we have not been communicated properly as to why these issues keep occurring frequently.”

“Assessment feedback has been late every time, regardless of module, year or teacher. Feedback is not regularly communicated with students; we must always email the administrative team for updates.”

“Staff consistently late to provide feedback and grades to assessments.”

Solutions

Whilst delays to assessments are sometimes inevitable, it seems to be a very common issue for BMB, and so it is recommended that a review of feedback takes place to determine why delays are as common as they are throughout modules and years. It is currently very often that the college policy of a two-week window for assessment feedback is not met.

Additionally, a system may be implemented so that in the event of feedback being delayed, alongside a message to students explaining this there is also a firm new date set for when they can expect to receive feedback. It would be beneficial for students to receive more detailed explanations as to why assessment feedback is delayed, so students no longer feel that they must chase up administration themselves in the event of delays and have some degree of reassurance.

If delays are due to spacing of assessments / modules, then a rework of the timetables throughout all three years may be beneficial in order to incorporate more time for staff to mark assessments.

2. Review Assessment Feedback Quality and Criteria

This recommendation has been chosen as several students noted in NSS comments that they felt marking and feedback for coursework was inconsistent throughout the duration of their studies. Complaints about the quality of feedback were generally linked to a feeling that assessment marks were not always justified by the comments given with them, and that feedback tended to be too brief.

Furthermore, some students placed emphasis on feedback not being useful in terms of guiding students on how to improve on assessed skills for the future. In line with the first recommendation (regarding delays to feedback), most students were particularly displeased with low feedback quality when this was also paired with significant, unexplained delays.

Quotes from students:

“No timely feedback and feedback comments have no details on how to improve further.”

“There were many instances of delayed or unhelpful feedback with regards to in-course assessments, with little or no warning as to the delay.”

“Feedback is rarely helpful as it is far too brief and it is also nearly always given back very late (sometimes months after the deadline)”

“Serious troubles with coursework (late instruction, delayed marking, little/no feedback). Knowledge examined in summative assessments not match with what is taught in the module.”

Solutions

Quality of feedback was a common topic throughout multiple departments following analysis of NSS comments, and several suggestions have been made that could also be incorporated into BMB. Therefore, it is recommended that the following are considered:

- A minimum word count for feedback, on an assessment-by-assessment basis:
 - Providing a minimum word limit for feedback may provide more satisfaction to students, as this would allow a bit more clarity for students in terms of what to expect when receiving grades and comments. This would also help to avoid cases in which students feel that their work has been marked unfairly compared to others.
- Preparing and providing a document to markers in each module that contains guidance towards establishing a solid set of expectations when providing feedback.
 - E.g. This could involve establishing a guideline for comments addressing both positive and negative points. Students would likely appreciate negative points to be coupled with more clear guidance on what they could have done to improve their grade, and how to tackle similar issues in the future.
 - It would be great if this year’s student reps could be directly involved in the development of this guidance document, as they will be able to communicate the

- thoughts of the student body in regards to where they feel improvement is necessary.
- In addition, guidelines could be set involving giving out equal amounts of both positive and negative feedback, to provide more structure. (e.g. 2 positive, 2 negative).
 - As part of this, each assessment could also be given a ‘feedback form’ of sorts, containing different categories that feedback should cover such as structure, understanding, language. This may be in a similar style to the rubric system that is currently used for a number of assessments and so may not apply to all assessments.
 - A general review of assessment feedback to place more emphasis on highlighting where students specifically missed marks / were generally weaker in assessments.
 - This would aid in giving students peace-of-mind regarding why they may have missed out on certain grades and could also provide better guidance as to where students may be able to improve.
 - In line with the NSS response, it may be beneficial to refresh all assessment marking criteria to improve clarity and ensure that students are aware of what is being asked of them for specific assessments.
 - It would be beneficial for student reps to also be involved in any assessment criteria review that takes place

3. Improve Communication with Students

A very common theme in NSS comments was that students felt a lack of adequate communication between course leads and students regarding important matters such as third year placements, feedback, improvement to the course, and general organisation of the course. A lack of transparency was quoted by several students and students expressed frustration at disorganisation, particularly regarding in the third year. There was a lack of confidence from students regarding financial and organisational details with AstraZeneca projects. In addition, the percentage agreement from students that it was “clear how their feedback was being acted upon” was very low for this year at just 16%.

Quotes from students:

“There was significant disorganisation in third year. / There was lack of clarity on how our third year was going to be evaluated right up until we started the year as we were going to be doing new projects.”

“Generally, it is incredibly badly organised. / Feedback given by us students about the course is never acted upon, or if it is, it's far too late and essentially meaningless. Information about changes relating to our course is always very late. Course organisers are unsympathetic about issues relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly their departmental safety net policy, where a large amount of work in third year (worth a huge amount of our degree) is not being covered by the safety net.”

“Transparency as to what is happening behind the scenes is non-existent. Mislead as to what placements would be available.”

"Immense amounts of chaos and miscommunication means that the course does not run smoothly, and most students are dissatisfied."

"Poor organisation since it is a new course at Imperial. / For students undertaking lab projects in [AstraZeneca], financial funding is a problem due to lack of transparency and contradicting stories from the course and the company."

Solutions

In order to improve communication throughout the course, one suggestion is that a bulletin from the FEO may be posted on a regular basis (once a term?) addressing issues highlighted by students, alongside proposed or currently ongoing changes to address these. This would allow students to feel more like their concerns are being addressed proactively.

In regards to the proposed bulletin, it could be beneficial for student reps to be involved, or even responsible for writing this bulletin after consulting with FEO once a term.

Regarding third year placements, changes have already been made since the first third-year cohort were assigned to theirs, so the main issues regarding timing for placements have been tackled. However, some issues are still present regarding confidence in projects at AstraZeneca. It is recommended that more detailed guidelines are published for second year students moving into third year regarding exactly what financial help will be available, in advance of project publication. This should also include what is expected of students in terms of living arrangements when undertaking projects in Cambridge. This is based off of NSS comments, but was also an issue this year for a number of second year students when choosing projects.

Faculty of Medicine (MBBS)

Written by Varja Čučulović, Rahul Penumaka, Conor Wisentaner and Rachel Kwok, in collaboration with Imperial College Union.

As elected student academic officers, we have had the pleasure of analysing the NSS responses to identify positive and negative themes, for which we have come up with 4 sets of recommendations. These were discussed with Imperial College Union representatives, whom have helped with ensuring that the recommendations are adequately specific and achievable.

We were encouraged by positive NSS results, particularly in the 'Learning Opportunities' and 'Students' Union' categories. However, it is clear that there is still space for more improvement, for example in the 'Organisation and Management', 'Teaching' and 'Learning resources' categories. We are keen to collaborate closely with the faculty in order to further improve the student experience.

1. Increase communication and organised exam arrangements

Many students expressed disappointment with various organisational errors, especially concerning exam deadlines and results. Whilst they understand that human errors do occur, they are frustrated as they feel as though the faculty is not empathetic about the effects of their mistakes, and possibly about the rigidity of their assignment deadlines. Those who were frustrated listed some mistakes made by the faculty, which they felt were avoidable.

"(The) allocation of our BSc choices inadvertently revealed the rank of all students against their respective peers, which caused much distress and upset."

"The deadlines imposed on student's written work are incredibly harsh and unforgiving. Contrastingly, Imperial seemed too often not stick to their deadlines for handing out examination results."

"The biggest debacle was our fifth PACEs results which were incorrectly sent to students - in this day and age I really don't expect such a huge Excel error."

"We were told we would be doing the exam on iPad's and when we got there none were charged, we had to wait 3 hours for them to charge."

Proposed solutions

There should be a calendar of important dates made available early on in the year, and every effort should be made to respect the pre-determined dates. Any changes should be signposted and explained in an empathic manner, with an understanding that moving results dates can be very anxiety-provoking.

In the event of big crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the entirety of the calendar can of course be updated accordingly; however, this should be done with consideration of student needs, i.e. asking for student input and explaining the reasoning behind any rescheduling.

The dissemination of important information e.g. allocation of modules, releasing results, etc. can be tested on a smaller group of control students if possible - the ICSMSU academic officers can help with this.

2. Address discrepancies in the quality of clinical placements

Many students commented on the discrepancies in clinical placements, with particular focus on the teaching offered and also the variety of specialty experienced. Generally, many felt as though there is little regulation of both the quality and quantity of teaching available at each site, and that the selection of placements may not cover basic medicine for all students. Despite these discrepancies, many students have noted positively that there is a good range of placements available.

“Placements usefulness is highly variable. It is a lottery with no choice given to students.”

“Placement allocations do not seem to be logical as it is entirely possible to go through the entire course having not had a placement in key medical specialities such as respiratory, which would be useful.”

“This meant in third year, some students had to learn most of the content from books whilst others had actual clinical experience/practice. It is better that firms were standardised in 5th and 6th year. I think it would be better to split 3rd year firms into smaller chunks, so everyone gets some core and some postgraduate firm bases.”

Proposed solutions

There should be a system to track placements allocated to each student. A list of essential placements (such as respiratory) should be proposed and a minimum number of essential allocations to be covered should be determined.

A systemic approach for feedback on placements should be proposed. Placement providers should be assessed based on students' feedback and a cut-off minimum score for further cooperation determined. If a placement provider is receiving low results, further students should not be sent on that placement. The procedure of this feedback mechanism should be communicated effectively to students.

There should be an ongoing system for reporting concerns during the placements as well. Students should be encouraged to report any issues to their academic tutors/ site leads, who should raise any problems with staff responsible for the relevant placement.

Prior to each placement, each clinical site should confirm that consultant mentors are working during most of the placement (e.g. >70%) and that they are well placed to provide support (e.g. not clinic based for a hospital placement). Additional mentors (of any grade) can be introduced to provide pastoral support, especially on longer placements. Mid-placement reviews have been helpful.

There should be capacity and flexibility for students to switch placements if there are significant problems. This would be especially important for GP placements where students may not be

able to find another doctor/ward to learn from, and that concerns may be difficult to raise in a small clinic. This process should be well signposted and of course, reserved only for issues otherwise unsolvable.

In general, there should be greater transparency between faculty, clinical sites and students. It is important that students receive more support on placements and that any issues arising during placements can be addressed quickly to avoid students receiving improper/ insufficient learning opportunities.

3. Increase student engagement on college and faculty levels

Some students reported a perceived gap in student engagement. Many respondents cited the quality of facilities as one of the most positive aspects of their experience; the selling of St Mary's Campus has therefore led to some students feeling as though their voices are not heard especially with larger decisions. This feeling also exists on a faculty level, where some students have reported insufficient engagement between faculty, e.g. heads of year, and the student body throughout the year, although it is worth noting that many students do feel that their feedback matters to the faculty.

"By far the most emotive negative aspect has been the decision from the College to sell off the Medical School building at St Mary's campus. (...) The way Imperial College London has handled the situation is quite patronising. We were told out of the blue of the decision, it is not up to negotiation, they refuse to provide details of to whom the building will be sold to, they intend to still have students at St. Mary's Hospital, but there physically not any space for them anywhere else."

"When large decisions are being considered e.g., selling off the St. Mary's student campus I feel as though the student body have a right to at least be included in those decisions rather than informed about them after the fact."

"Sometimes, I feel Imperial doesn't listen to our views, particularly surrounding the selling off of one of our campuses and also in various changes to social spaces and social events throughout my time at Imperial."

"The medical department in particular regularly ask for feedback and make sure we are able to voice our concerns."

'Student voice' was the second lowest scoring category in the NSS survey (% agree: 70.1 vs overall 82.0).

Proposed solutions

Seek out the opinions of students when decisions, such as those affecting the available facilities or the logistics of clinical placements, are made e.g. through townhall discussions with adequate notice, surveys, focus groups, or through the student union. Publish the results of these discussions – this can be done through the SU.

Release updates on proposed/ confirmed changes to infrastructure – perhaps through heads of years. As the money is put back into the ICSM community, increase transparency in where it is being put. Encourage reps to communicate about any cooperation with senior faculty to the year.

Heads of years to further improve general support to students.

Empower students to reach out to senior faculty when appropriate.

4. Ensure exam feedback is consistent

Many students raised issues about the quality and timing of the feedback they received on assignments. There is a perception that faculty can be disorganised. Several students called the quality of their feedback ‘poor’, ‘brief’ and ‘not helpful’. Some students also commented on the lack of feedback for exams which makes it difficult to improve.

“During our BSc year, written feedback from in-course assessments was generally quite poor. It hasn’t really been consistent.”

“Feedback on assessments is generally very brief and not very helpful.”

“Feedback for assignments and examinations is mixed. In some years, we just knew our overall scores then we would get a breakdown per topic on the level of our performance. In third year, we did not receive any actual comments on our OSCE performance just raw scores and rankings. Whereas in fifth year, we did have the chance to view written feedback with our tutors. During our BSc year, written feedback from in-course assessments was generally quite poor.”

‘Assessment and feedback’ in the NSS survey received the lowest satisfaction score amongst all categories (% agree: 61.6 vs 82.0 overall); the results found that students were particularly dissatisfied with the following prompts:

- The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance
- Marking and assessment has been fair
- Feedback on my work has been timely.

Proposed solutions

Require examiners to provide a minimum word count when providing feedback on written assignments.

Remind examiners that copy-pasting feedback will not benefit student learning as much as individual feedback.

Provide examiners guidance on what feedback to provide. For example, they must provide one positive point, one negative point and how the student can improve

Consult with students on what the turnaround time for feedback should be. Release a calendar for results dates that everyone can fall back on and respect the dates set.

Consistently provide students with more detailed descriptions of their exam performance, for example, with a breakdown of results from each station in practical exams (OSPE, OSCE, PACES) and areas to revisit in written exams.

Potentially allow a time for students to communicate and ask the marker questions after receiving the results. If this isn't logistically possible for all students, perhaps students who received lower marks can be prioritised.

Positive themes & quotes

A large proportion of responses described high satisfaction of the calibre of teaching, often noting the passion and enthusiasm in the core teaching faculty, and generally good clinical teaching at different placements.

"It is clear that the teaching staff really enjoy teaching and are passionate about medical education."

"Some of the regular, experienced lecturers consistently deliver fantastic, useful, easily understandable teaching. Hospital placements generally very satisfying, with good opportunities to learn."

"The course has largely been engaging, and is taught by an enthusiastic core faculty who care a lot."

"The course instils in the students an incredibly detailed knowledge of the scientific basis of medicine whilst also receiving outstanding clinical teaching at our west London hospitals."

The student union and various clubs and societies have provided valuable support to students

"The medical Students' Union (ICSMSU) is fantastic. They create a real sense of community and you feel very supported throughout medical school."

"The Students' Union put on a massive range of events - both extracurricular, social and academic making for an enriching and fulfilling experience."

"Medical Students' Union is fantastic at building community and providing social, academic and welfare support."

"The student community at Imperial College London is absolutely superb. We have the largest collection of clubs and societies out of any UK medical school and this forms a core component of every student's experience."

"The university has a huge variety of clubs and societies to further enhance academic/personal/social/management skills which has been essential to my time here"

Some students reported satisfaction with their personal tutors.

"Very well organised and supportive personal tutor system."

"Great personal tutor, really felt on my side and supportive."

The Faculty Education Office (FEO) is seen to be responsive and helpful

"The FEO is a good port of call, usually whenever I email them about a query, I get an answer quite quickly. And even if they can't help me, they always direct me to the appropriate contact."

"FEO has been also always extremely helpful and rapid to reply whenever I had a problem."