Arts Students' Union Teaching Excellent Framework (TEF) Student Submission

TEF Nominated Student Contact: Sophia Nasif (London College of Communication Officer)

Section 1. Approach to evidence-gathering

This section of our submission shall outline our evidence (and the methods we have used to develop this evidence base) in order to accurately reflect the opinions of students who study at University of the Arts London (UAL).

TEF Nominated Student Contact and Arts Students' Union

I am one of six sabbatical officers employed by Arts Students' Union (Arts SU). UAL is comprised of six colleges, and I have representative oversight for one of the colleges (London College of Communication); however, my role is democratically elected by students from across all of UAL, and as such I work to represent all UAL students. Arts SU represents the interests of all students enrolled at UAL (more than 22,000 students in 2021/22), and it is my role (alongside the rest of the sabbatical officer team) to facilitate conversations between students and the university, as well as advocate on their behalf. Arts SU does this through a range of forums, including our Student Forums, Annual Members Meeting, our course representative system, attendance at university committees, meetings and working groups, democratic elections, as well as Arts SU conducting our own research on issues that affect our members. Arts SU employs a Senior Policy and Research Officer as a full-time member of staff for the purpose of conducting this research; this is demonstrative of our commitment to creating accurate evidence on the opinions of our members and has enhanced the reliability of this submission.

Creating this submission

This submission was created by drawing from Arts SU's extensive research base on student opinion, as well as feedback compiled from course representatives, and external reports (produced either by UAL or other sector-wide resources, such as the National Student Survey). We undertook a discursive process, beginning with gathering evidence from pre-existing data sources. The data sources we have drawn from are the following:

* **Arts SU primary research**: the Policy Team of Arts SU compile in-depth primary research on issues that affect our membership, collecting evidence on the student experience, and proposing interventions that can be made by UAL to improve students' lives while studying at UAL. We have drawn from the following Arts SU research reports for this submission:
  * *Arts SU Cost of Living report*: A mixed-methods research report into the impact of the rising cost of living on students' experience of studying at UAL, produced in 2022/23. It is based on a representative sample of 1425 responses from UAL students.
  * *Arts SU Cost of Study report*: A mixed-methods research report into the cost of study at UAL, produced in 2018/19. The findings of this research initiated a partnership working group between Arts SU and UAL with actions focussed on reducing the cost

of study. It is based on a representative sample of 891 responses from UAL students.

- ⊠ *Arts SU Housing and Community report*: a mixed-methods research report analysing UAL students' attitudes towards their housing situation and sense of belonging while studying at UAL, produced in 2020/21. It is based on a representative sample of 500 responses from UAL students.
- ⊠ *Arts SU Attainment Gap Report*: a qualitative research report on the impact of the attainment gap on the experiences of students of colour at UAL, produced in 2019/20.
- ⊠ *Arts SU response to UAL's draft Anti-Racism Strategy*: a qualitative research report, compiling student attitudes and opinion in response to the draft version of UAL's Anti-Racism Strategy, produced in 2020/21.
- ⊠ *Arts SU Crits and Inclusive Learning report*: a qualitative research report on student experiences of inclusion in teaching and learning in art and design education, specifically in reference to the crit teaching method, produced in 2021/22.

* **Arts SU course representative reports**: reports are produced by Arts SU's Representation and Democracy Team, summarising themes emerging from termly meetings between course representatives and the Dean of their School or programme cluster (UAL colleges organise courses into Schools or, in the case of Central Saint Martins, programme clusters).
* **Arts SU Advice Team reports**: reports are produced by Arts SU's Advice Team, summarising themes emerging from the casework, complaints, disciplinaries, appeals, and extenuating circumstances requests they support UAL students with.
* **Arts SU's Big Question Survey and qualitative follow-up**: an annual survey of all Arts SU members covering topics such as members' aspirations, educational experiences, sense of belonging, and desired improvements at UAL. Key themes that emerged from the survey were followed up with exploratory focus groups, to create a supplementary qualitative piece of research. It is based on a representative sample of 1620 responses from UAL students.
* **National Student Survey (NSS) and UAL internal student experience surveys**: alongside the NSS, UAL produces internal student experience surveys using similar questions to the NSS to track changes within cohorts across years of study.
* **Arts SU Student Written Submissions to UAL's Internal Quality Reviews**: Arts SU usually produces School-based student written submissions as part of UAL's annual Quality Review process (usually 2 to 3 Schools per year are subject to such a review). These submissions are based on a bespoke teaching and learning survey produced and analysed by Arts SU, and focus groups run by Arts SU with students based at the School under review. Quality Reviews have been suspended as of 2022/23 in place of UAL's Accountability Framework.
* **Student Forums / Annual Members Meeting (AMM) motions**: successful motions submitted to and voted upon at Arts SU's Students Forums and AMM are demonstrative of student opinion.
* **Sabbatical officer manifesto commitments**: the manifestos upon which sabbatical officers are elected are demonstrative of student opinion. We have undertaken analysis on recurring themes since 2018/19.

* **Conversations with Students report**: a report produced by UAL in partnership with Arts SU mapping the points at which students are involved in conversations about their time at UAL and sites at which student voice is facilitated.
* **Sabbatical officer testimony**: personal testimony from Arts SU's current sabbatical team, including their experiences as students at UAL, as well as initiatives they have been involved in representing students to UAL.

After compiling this evidence, Arts SU hosted an internal TEF Submission Workshop Day for the sabbatical officer team (as well as senior members of staff at Arts SU) to analyse and theme the data. This process involved in-depth discussion, in order to triangulate the data across evidence bases, and produce an accurate picture of student opinion at UAL. The write-up of the process of theming and analysis has formed the substantive basis of this TEF student submission. This submission covers all relevant courses delivered by UAL, as set out in the "Teaching Excellence Framework: Guidance on student submissions" document, but does not include any optional courses.

Independent submission and partnership working

We can confirm that UAL did not seek to influence the content of this student submission, and that it was written independently of the university. We maintained this independence by developing our own processes for its creation, as outlined above, with dedicated Arts SU staff support separate to the university.

UAL shared their submission with us in advance, and we shared ours in kind. UAL also endeavoured to make available to us whatever resources we required in the writing of this submission, including institutional data that we requested, as well as the offer of resources for staffing. UAL did not attempt to influence any of our processes, nor did they make their support for our submission conditional on any outcomes. The partnership in this process has been positive, candid and collaborative.

Section 2. Student experience

Using the five TEF indicators relating to student experience as the thematic guide, this section of the submission shall outline the opinion of students at UAL in relation to student experience.

The teaching on my course

Students at UAL overall have a positive experience of teaching at UAL. Students at UAL value the knowledge and expertise of their teachers, who are often leaders in their respective fields. This is reflected in the wealth of nominations made by students (over 600 in 2022) to Arts SU's Arts Awards, recognising excellent teaching across the university. Much teaching at UAL is undertaken by teachers with practical experience of the industry their discipline belongs to, which greatly aligns with the desire (reflected in survey data, such as Arts SU's Big Question Survey) of many UAL students to have teaching that is industry-led and responsive to their future career aspirations.

Students also are positive about the teaching they receive from non-academic teaching staff, such as those in technical support, who deliver training on, for example, the use of machinery or training in specific craft-based techniques. These members of staff deliver non-traditional forms of teaching situated outside of formal classroom hours and are available for ad hoc demonstrations and supervised learning. This mode of teaching is a key strength of UAL, as it is demonstrative of the practical and skills-based education that many arts students desire.

The global Covid-19 pandemic presented unique challenges to the delivery of arts education, which is more acutely dependent on on-site teaching than in more traditional text-based courses. As a result of this, student satisfaction with teaching has fallen at UAL in comparison to pre-pandemic satisfaction scores, evidenced by the most recent NSS results in 2021/22. 71% of students reported being satisfied with the teaching on their course (a slight improvement from the previous year's score of 70%). When taking a longer-term view, looking over the period from 2018/19 to 2021/22, 'teaching on my course' in the NSS has historically been one of the stronger areas for UAL, scoring in the mid-to-high 70s % (76% in 2018/19 and 77% in 2019/20). As UAL emerges from all lockdown restrictions, and on-site teaching returns in full, it is likely that student opinion will be restored to these more reflective pre-pandemic scores.

Decolonisation of the arts remains an issue in teaching that is particularly important to a vast number of students at UAL. Arts SU's Attainment Gap Report and our written response to UAL's draft Anti-Racism Strategy provide evidence for the way in which students (particularly those of colour) desire action from UAL to fully embrace the decolonisation agenda. This not only includes the call for reforms to the curriculum (recognising the legacy of colonial thinking in arts teaching and its harmful reproduction of structural hierarchies), but also addressing underrepresentation of minority groups in UAL's academic staffing structures. UAL has made great progress in addressing student concerns around the decolonisation of the curriculum in key areas, and this should be commended; establishing the Decolonising Arts Institute, collaborating with Arts SU on the creation of a zine based on the theme of decolonisation, and developing resources for course reps to engage with the decolonisation agenda in their course meetings. In addition, UAL's work on reducing attainment gaps has been effective and well-received by students. However, the conversation remains ongoing, and UAL must continue to allay the concerns of those students of colour who still do not feel that the composition of the teaching staff body is reflective of their lived experience.

At times, students feel that full-time academic teaching staff are over-stretched, and as a result, their experience of being taught suffers. Course leaders often bear an administrative burden disproportionate to their capacity, and some courses lack the number of other full-time teaching staff in post to share this burden. This is reflected in UAL's low scores for Course Organisation and Management in the NSS, creating a dual problem that affects both teaching and administration. Due to the industry-led approach to teaching, UAL relies on guest lecturers or hourly-paid staff, often from a professional background, for whom teaching may not always be their primary passion or skill. This is a Catch-22 for students, who desire industry expertise on their course, but also desire high quality teaching. UAL's recent creation of the Course Support Service, providing additional resource to course administration, should remove some of the administrative burden of course management from teaching staff and has the potential to improve student satisfaction in teaching, as well as course organisation. Students welcome

UAL's commitment to training and development of teaching staff, particularly those who are guest lecturers or hourly-paid members of teaching staff, to ensure a high-quality teaching experience on every course, although more progress must be made.

Academic support

Students at UAL are mostly positive about their experience of academic support. Much like with teaching, NSS student satisfaction with academic support at UAL has fallen during the global pandemic (to 70% satisfaction in 2020/21, and slightly recovering in 2021/22 to 71%). However, pre-pandemic scores were consistently in the mid-70s % (75% in 2018/19 and 76% in 2019/20), and with the lifting of lockdown restrictions it is likely student satisfaction will restore to these levels. Student engagement with UAL's academic support offer (whether that is centrally administered or course-based) shows positive correlations around attainment and continuation rates.

18% of students at UAL have disclosed a disability (almost 1 in 5), and as such, course support for disabled students is of paramount importance at UAL. Disabled students are primarily supported through Individual Support Agreements (ISAs) whereby adjustments based on the disabled student's needs are implemented in the learning environment. Although in the main ISAs are successful, students have reported differential approaches to their implementation across courses, with some courses being less robust in supporting students than others. This could be a result of the federated nature of UAL, with policy implementation experiencing variance dependent on local college and course cultures. UAL have committed to a review of ISAs, in partnership with Arts SU, recognising the need for reform to ensure all students are receiving the support they require. After lobbying from Arts SU, UAL have also committed to implementing compulsory disability awareness training for all UAL staff from 2022/23, which is further evidence of their cross-university approach to supporting disabled students and their educational experience.

A positive legacy of the Covid-19 pandemic has been UAL's embrace of the notion of mainstreaming adjustments, so that where possible, disabled students do not need to request a different mode of delivery as it is already implemented in a flexible approach to teaching. An example of this has been the implementation of recording lectures as standard across much of UAL. Not only is this beneficial to disabled students, it is also helpful to students for whom English is not their first language, as well as providing a revision aid to all students. Although not every course has embraced the spirit of mainstreaming adjustments, and some holdouts remain, UAL have worked collaboratively with Arts SU to ensure that positive gains from learning in lockdown will not be lost. Students would welcome UAL pushing forward with the agenda of mainstreaming adjustments, to build a learning environment that meets the individual needs of all students.

Assessment and feedback

There have been great improvements in student attitudes towards assessment and feedback at UAL which should be commended. In the NSS, UAL's student satisfaction in this area is above benchmark; this is a result of conscientious ongoing work by UAL over the last decade, in

collaboration with Arts SU, to address student concerns about the fairness and efficacy of assessment and feedback.

Assessment in arts education is largely subjective, and can be prone to unconscious bias, which has historically led some students at UAL (particularly students of colour) to query the integrity or fairness of assessment procedures. In order to counter this, UAL have introduced anonymous marking, to counteract unconscious biases in the marking system, as well as rolling out unconscious bias training to members of academic staff. By working with Arts SU to directly address concerns where students have perceived bias in the assessment procedures, as well as working with Shades of Noir (UAL's independent intersectional antiracist programme), UAL has observed a strong increase in student satisfaction in this area. For example, in 2018, only 69.23% of Black students responded positively to the question 'Marking and assessment has been fair' in the NSS. In 2022, 76.52% of Black students responded positively to the same question, an increase of 7.29 percentage points. While there remains work to be done in this area, UAL has shown a commitment to respond to student concerns and make structural changes to improve student experience with regards to assessment and feedback.

The BAME attainment gap (also known as the awarding gap) remains a persistent issue at UAL; however, as with addressing unconscious bias in assessment procedures, UAL have demonstrated a strong commitment to reducing, and ultimately eliminating, the attainment gap s that exist. This has been in response to immense student pressure to tackle this issue, highlighted by the publication of Arts SU's Attainment Gap Report in 2019 which articulated the strength of student feeling on this topic. Since then, UAL commissioned an external review on Awarding Gaps, of which an Arts SU sabbatical officer was part of the three-member panel who convened and led the review. This is demonstrative of the partnership working that exists between UAL and Arts SU, and the degree of seriousness that UAL takes student opinion in this area. The review was able to surface existing good practice across UAL at tackling attainment gaps, as well as highlight areas of student voice work (such as Arts SU's Cost of Study research) that could be used to design meaningful interventions. As a result of this and other work on attainment gaps, UAL has been able to reduce its BAME attainment gap by 5 percentage points between 2021 and 2022. Although there remains much work to be done in the area, as part of a broader process of decolonisation and structural change, UAL is firmly aligned with student opinion in making this a priority for action.

An area of growing student concern around feedback methods is the effective use of crits at UAL, and at art schools more broadly. Crits ("critiques") are a widely adopted pedagogical method employed at art schools as a form of group feedback. Crits usually take the form of a student being required to present their work-in-progress to a class of peers; feedback is then led by a tutor or academic, followed by feedback from the student's peers. Several different demographic groups of students have raised issues with the accessibility of crits as a feedback method, including LGBT+ students, disabled students, students of colour, and international students. In the most extreme cases, marginalised students can experience unconscious bias or discriminatory attitudes directed against them in the crit environment. In 2021, Arts SU published a qualitative study on the experience of students at UAL in crits, and found that while some students benefitted from this direct form of feedback, marginalised students were having disproportionately negative experiences in these learning spaces. While UAL have been

supportive of the findings of this research and have been willing to engage in conversations around the inclusivity and delivery of crits, a lack of concrete action by UAL across the board has meant that little has been done to resolve the issues the research raised.

Timely and effective feedback on assessed work underpins successful learning gain, and UAL have endeavoured to ensure that turn-around times on feedback for assessed work are improving each year. In the year 2021/22, a UAL audit of turn-around times found that 78% of assessment feedback was returned to students in an acceptable time (3 to 4 weeks), compared to 71% in the previous audit in 2020/21, an increase of 7 percentage points. This process of continual improvement should be commended and is an example of how UAL is working to measure its ongoing progress and meet student expectations.

Learning resources

Prior to the pandemic, learning resources were the area of student satisfaction where UAL students were most positive, according to the NSS; in both 2018/19 and 2019/20, 82% of respondents were satisfied with UAL's learning resources. UAL has provision for worldclass facilities, including workshops, studios, libraries, and technical resources, all of which are greatly appreciated by the student body and are key driver of students choosing to attend study at UAL.

Due to the previously discussed on-site nature of arts education, the pandemic had a particularly acute impact on student satisfaction with regards to learning resources, as lockdown restrictions and Covid safety measures limited or entirely restricted access to these resources. In the most recent NSS, student satisfaction stood at 74%, which while a recovery from the dramatic fall in 2020/21 (to 56%), it has not returned to pre-pandemic levels. As with teaching, now that most restrictions have been lifted and students regain full access to these spaces, it is likely to return to the consistently high satisfaction levels that UAL previously enjoyed.

While the technical and academic resources across UAL are consistently high quality, access to learning resources can differ across the university by college, with some courses left with limited space and students competing for access to studios and workshops (especially during busy assessment periods). Course representatives report cases of students queuing as early as 7am outside of colleges to ensure they have space in studios to undertake their work, with some students unable to secure access and needing to work from home in less appropriate work settings. This is particularly felt on some of the larger making courses, such as Fashion Design, based at London College of Fashion. While new site developments for London College of Fashion at Stratford and London College of Communication at Elephant and Castle promise to resolve some of these issues, for students who are currently dealing with difficulty in accessing learning resources, promises of future resolution offer little solace in the here and now, nor do they resolve the issues for students on courses at other colleges. In addition to this, although students were historically consulted on the development of the new sites at their initiation stage, recent student representation in relation to these projects has been minimal, with sabbatical officers not invited to key working groups with oversight for site developments or estates planning.

In response to a squeeze on access to learning and technical resources on some courses, particularly during the pandemic lockdown, wealthier students often spend their way out of this

problem. For example, they may hire a private studio to undertake their practice or buy an industrial sewing machine, while other students compete to use those provided by the university; often more disadvantaged students do not have access to these options. This creates a two-tier system on some courses, whereby wealthier students can produce industry-level finishes on assessed artefacts because of their relative financial advantages. This is illustrative of the burden the cost of study places on students, with less advantaged students feeling that good grades are correlated with the ability to spend a lot of money. UAL recognise this perception amongst students, and after the publication of Arts SU's Cost of Study research highlighting these issues, UAL established a joint working group with Arts SU specifically tasked with tackling the cost of study. The work of this group has seen multiple successes, including greater investment by the university in its hardship fund (allowing students to apply for support with materials costs), introducing cost of study guidelines on each course with the aim to prevent high costs being built into the curriculum, and initiating the creation of a materials recycling infrastructure.

The partnership working between UAL and Arts SU in tackling the cost of study has been positive and productive, although impact has not always been felt as fast as students would desire. Arts education places unique financial burdens on its students by the nature of its delivery, and there remains much work to be done in this area to reducing undue financial stress on students, but UAL have been constructive and committed partners with students in seeking to address these issues.

Student voice

UAL and Arts SU enjoy a close and collaborative working relationship, striving to work in the spirit of partnership between the university and its students. The Arts SU sabbatical officer team meet regularly with senior members of UAL staff at bi-weekly business meetings, where student feedback is directly presented to UAL and a plan of action is devised. This proactive approach to student feedback ensures that issues raised by the student body through the Students' Union are quickly responded to, while also ensuring that student representatives are consulted on changes to the university on a regular basis.

In the formal UAL committee structure, students have representation on most committees through the sabbatical officers and support by union staff. The inclusion of union staff support to committees has aided the community work and support of sabbatical officers. Arts SU sabbatical officers are invited to co-chair UAL's Education Enhancement Committee alongside UAL's Director of Education, and have places on other academic committees such as Academic Board and Academic Quality and Standards Committee. Arts SU also has representation on Court of Governors, UAL's governing body comprised of 25 governors, with a sabbatical officer from Arts SU filling the student governor seat. However, there is no student representation on UAL's Executive Board, the senior management group where many key university decisions are made, that sits outside the formal academic committee structure; this indicates a limit to which UAL is willing to involve students in university decision-making.

At a local course level, UAL supports the facilitation of Arts SU's course representative system, through organising the elections of course reps and enrolling them for training with Arts SU;

however, there are improvements that could be made. Course meetings between course reps and their course staff (the most granular level of formal student representation at UAL) are solely administrated by UAL staff. At present, minutes from these meetings are not easily accessible to the Students' Union, which indicates a lack of strategic support from UAL in the area of academic representation. The federated nature of the university creates challenges, with differences across course cultures and colleges, however there is a need to bring together the student voice systems to provide a consistent student experience across all courses. While support for academic representative is a priority for managers and leaders of the university, the ability for academic and course staff to ensure the facilitation of student voice is more challenging than at some other institutions.

UAL has shown a willingness to learn from the sector to embrace improving student voice mechanisms. 'Survey Season', the period of the academic cycle dedicated to promoting student satisfaction surveys and explaining the relevance of student voice to university processes, shows a desire to work with staff and students to engage them in feedback mechanisms. Arts SU sabbatical officers have been invited to attend the university's Survey Group, which is another example of partnership working. While the sabbatical officers may hold different political views on the efficacy of the NSS, Survey Group is a conducive and respectful space to share differing views, and is demonstrative of UAL's commitment to including student voice in their planning and operations.

In addition to this, UAL have begun a process of mapping student voice and initiating strategic development work across the university, as is referenced in the Conversations with Students report, however students now expect this mapping to turn into action.

3. Student Outcomes

Using the three TEF indicators relating to student outcomes as the thematic guide, this section of the submission shall outline the opinion of students at UAL in relation to student outcomes.

Continuation – the proportion of students continuing on their course or gaining a qualification after one year (two years for part-time students).

UAL are consistently above benchmark for continuation rates and do an excellent job of ensuring students continue their studies. UAL's retention of minority ethnic students and disabled students is also consistently above benchmark, which is illustrative of the investment UAL has put into ensuring support measures are in place for all students.

Completion – the proportion of students completing their course.

Similarly, UAL perform very well at ensuring students complete their studies, consistently performing above benchmark. One way in which they do this is through providing support for students to take time out if required, following up on those students taking time out with pastoral care, and helping them reintegrate into the academic cycle once they return to their studies.

During the pandemic, there was an increased concern around the potential for students to drop-out of university, either during that year or further into their academic journey. During 2020/21, Arts SU published our Housing and Community research, with the Community aspect of this research investigating student concerns around exiting university prematurely. Respondents were asked how often, if at all, they had considered dropping out of university. Over half of respondents (53.62%) never considered dropping out of university, however 46.37% considered it. Of those who had considered it, 19.68% of respondents said they considered it on a termly basis, 14.25% considered it a monthly basis, 9.95% considered it on a weekly basis, and 2.49% considered it a daily basis. Despite almost half of students during this time saying they had considered dropping out, continuation rates at UAL have continued to increase (reaching 92% in 2022). This is evidence that despite hardships students face, UAL has put in place support measures that ensure students feel able to continue.

In response to the findings that almost half of respondents to our Housing and Community research had considered dropping out of UAL at some point, Arts SU created the Arts SU Companion Scheme (now called Buddy Up), with the aim of providing friendship and socialisation during the pandemic lockdowns. UAL have been incredibly supportive of this initiative and have integrated it into their offer to students as part of a package of support measures to students experiencing isolation, one of the key drivers of dropout rates.

Progression – the proportion of students progressing to managerial or professional employment, or further study.

UAL does not tend to perform well in the metrics devised by the government to measure graduate destinations, however this does not mean that students receive insufficient career support. As has been previously referenced, much teaching at UAL is industry-led, and involves career-oriented forms of assessment, such as live briefs commissioned by industry. Students value the opportunity to undergo placements or sandwich years that develop their portfolio in their chosen field.

Intended and "successful" graduate outcomes can look vastly different for each student, due to their area of study, as well as their intentions when choosing to study their courses. Evidence of what students gain from their education also differs and may be difficult to provide for certain areas of study, in particular the creative arts.

Creative arts graduate destinations often involve an extended period of unpaid internships and portfolio building, as well as starting their own businesses or working as self-employed, which will not translate as quickly into high-earning jobs in a way that many traditional academic degrees do. This is as a result of the practices that exist in the creative arts sector, rather than as a result of insufficient career preparation at university. Arts degree providers and their students should not be penalised for the blight of slower career development of its graduates compared to other sectors, and the government's underfunding of the creative arts sector, nor should arts universities such as UAL carry the blame for the economy that many creative arts graduates emerge into. Exploitative employment practices in the creative industries, and tackling low wages in the broader economy, should be an area that the government should be

held to account over, rather than utilising (and potentially scapegoating) arts universities and their students as levers for economic growth. This is important context for why UAL may perform differently in measures for progression.