



It's all about

them

The universities that do well in *Times Higher Education's* Student Experience poll put students first, but as **Rebecca Attwood** learns, there is more than one way to do that

**S**tanding in the atrium, not knowing anybody, feeling small”: these are the words with which one student sums up their unhappiest moment at university.

For Becca Carrant, dean of students at the University of Bradford, hearing of experiences such as this “brings tears to the eyes”.

“Students need friendship; they need to feel part of a community; and they need good academic support,” she says. “We’ve got empirical data to show that is essential. It is what keeps students at university.”

It may seem straightforward enough, but with student numbers nearly tripling in the past two decades, an ever more diverse student body and constraints on financial resources, achieving this goal is not always as simple as it sounds.

Bradford is one of many universities that is harnessing the power of technology to help.

It operates an online social network where young people can begin making links with peers and sharing their hopes and fears before they even apply to the university.

As part of what Carrant terms their “e-induction”, students will soon be able to download to their mobile phones guides to help prepare them for university life. The aim is to make them feel at home before they even set foot on campus.

In addition, a “self-audit” helps students gauge their levels of confidence in different academic areas. This in turn is used to develop an action plan that students can work through with their personal tutors.

“Research has found that the extent to which students feel welcome and the quality of social interactions with teachers have a bearing on the likelihood of a



Rank 2009	Rank 2008	University name	Overall score	Respondents	Weighting 2									1.5						1					I would recommend my university to a friend	
					High-quality staff/lectures	Helpful/interested staff	Well-structured courses	Good social life	Good community atmosphere	Good extracurricular activities/societies	Good environment on campus/around university	High-quality facilities	Personal requirements catered for	Good student union	Good support/welfare	Good personal relationship with teaching staff	Centralised/convenient facilities	Good industry connections	Good accommodation	Good security	Cheap shop/bar/amenities	Tuition in small groups	Good library and library opening hours	Fair workload		Good sports facilities
1	1	Loughborough University	84.9	128	6.0	5.8	5.9	6.3	6.2	6.4	6.4	6.3	5.9	6.5	6.0	5.6	6.3	6.2	5.9	5.9	5.8	5.2	6.4	5.6	6.8	6.5
2	3	University of Cambridge	82.6	259	6.5	6.5	6.2	5.8	6.1	6.4	6.3	6.1	5.9	4.6	6.0	6.2	5.7	6.0	6.0	5.9	4.7	6.8	6.5	4.4	5.0	6.4
3	2	University of Oxford	82.6	197	6.5	6.4	6.1	5.9	6.2	6.5	6.2	6.2	5.9	4.2	5.9	6.3	5.8	5.6	6.0	5.8	4.7	6.8	6.5	4.6	5.7	6.5
4	4	University of Sheffield	82.3	196	6.0	5.9	5.8	6.4	6.1	6.3	6.2	6.1	5.5	6.5	5.9	5.7	6.0	5.4	5.7	5.9	5.4	5.3	6.6	5.6	6.0	6.4
5	6	University of East Anglia	82.1	122	6.0	5.9	5.9	6.1	6.2	6.2	6.5	6.0	5.6	5.9	5.8	5.9	6.2	5.1	6.1	5.9	4.8	5.3	6.3	5.7	6.5	6.4
6	8	Aberystwyth University	82.1	97	6.1	6.1	6.1	6.2	6.3	6.1	6.3	5.9	5.7	5.5	5.8	5.8	6.0	5.1	5.8	6.0	5.6	5.8	6.0	5.7	5.8	6.4
7	11	University of Leeds	81.9	185	6.0	5.9	5.8	6.4	6.2	6.3	6.2	5.9	5.7	6.3	5.9	5.6	6.1	5.5	5.7	5.7	5.1	5.5	6.2	5.6	5.4	6.5
8	12	University of Dundee	80.8	75	6.0	5.9	5.9	6.1	5.9	5.9	6.1	6.1	5.5	6.0	5.6	5.9	6.1	5.3	5.5	5.7	5.5	5.5	6.2	5.7	6.0	6.3
9	9	University of Southampton	80.6	164	5.9	5.8	5.8	6.1	6.0	6.1	6.2	6.0	5.5	5.9	5.7	5.6	5.9	5.5	5.9	5.7	5.6	5.2	6.1	5.5	6.1	6.3
10	13	University of Glasgow	80.6	136	6.0	6.0	5.8	6.3	5.9	6.1	6.1	5.9	5.5	6.0	5.7	5.7	6.0	5.3	5.1	5.5	5.6	5.7	6.5	5.5	6.1	6.3
11	7	University of Exeter	80.3	160	6.1	5.9	5.9	6.0	6.0	5.9	6.4	6.0	5.5	5.4	5.7	5.8	5.8	5.2	5.7	6.0	4.7	5.3	6.4	5.7	5.8	6.4
12	19	Durham University	80.3	189	6.2	5.9	5.9	6.0	6.3	6.3	6.3	5.8	5.6	5.4	6.0	5.4	5.5	5.1	5.8	5.7	5.7	5.4	5.8	5.6	5.5	6.5
13	14	University of Leicester	79.9	151	6.1	6.0	6.0	6.0	5.9	5.9	6.1	5.8	5.5	5.7	5.7	5.8	5.7	5.1	5.6	5.7	5.2	5.9	6.5	5.6	5.4	6.3
14	5	University of St Andrews	79.9	104	6.3	6.2	6.1	6.1	6.3	6.3	6.4	5.5	5.6	4.9	5.9	5.9	6.0	5.0	5.3	6.2	4.4	5.8	5.1	5.6	4.8	6.4
15	40	University of Essex	79.5	65	6.0	6.0	5.9	5.9	6.0	6.0	6.2	5.7	5.5	5.6	5.8	5.8	6.2	5.2	5.5	5.7	4.8	5.5	5.8	5.6	5.7	6.2
16	18	University of Warwick	79.5	190	5.9	5.8	5.8	5.7	5.8	6.2	6.2	6.0	5.5	5.3	5.6	5.5	6.0	5.6	5.9	5.9	4.3	5.4	6.1	5.5	6.1	6.2
17	17	Cardiff University	79.4	180	6.0	5.8	5.8	6.3	6.0	6.2	6.1	5.6	5.4	6.1	5.7	5.5	5.8	5.3	5.6	5.7	5.6	5.2	6.0	5.4	5.2	6.3
18	23	University of Central Lancashire	79.3	88	5.7	5.7	5.6	6.0	5.9	5.7	6.0	5.9	5.5	6.1	5.7	5.9	6.1	5.3	5.5	5.8	5.5	5.4	6.5	5.5	5.6	5.8
19	35	University of Nottingham	79.2	233	6.0	5.8	5.8	6.1	5.8	6.0	6.4	6.0	5.6	5.4	5.6	5.4	5.8	5.5	5.6	5.6	5.0	5.2	6.2	5.5	5.7	6.3
20	16	Newcastle University	78.9	145	5.9	5.8	5.8	6.4	6.0	5.9	6.1	5.9	5.5	5.4	5.6	5.6	6.0	5.5	5.2	5.6	5.1	5.1	6.1	5.6	5.7	6.3
21	32	University of Bath	78.7	142	5.8	5.6	5.8	5.8	5.9	6.0	6.1	5.9	5.4	5.1	5.6	5.5	6.0	6.0	5.4	5.9	4.5	5.0	6.5	5.4	6.5	6.1
22*	15*	Bangor University	78.7	43	6.0	5.9	5.7	5.9	6.0	5.9	6.0	5.8	5.6	5.6	5.7	5.8	5.7	5.0	5.4	5.9	4.9	5.5	5.7	5.9	5.1	6.4
23	43	University of Edinburgh	78.1	190	6.1	5.8	5.7	6.1	5.8	6.0	6.0	5.9	5.4	5.6	5.6	5.4	5.8	5.3	5.3	5.6	4.9	5.2	5.8	5.6	6.0	6.3
24	33	University of Birmingham	78.0	179	5.9	5.7	5.6	6.0	5.8	5.9	6.3	5.8	5.4	5.3	5.7	5.5	5.9	5.4	5.4	5.7	4.8	5.2	6.0	5.5	5.5	6.3
25	29	University of Surrey	77.8	100	5.8	5.7	5.5	5.8	5.8	5.9	6.3	5.6	5.6	5.6	5.8	5.5	6.0	5.9	5.6	5.5	4.7	5.0	6.2	5.2	5.4	6.2
26*	52	University of Sussex	77.6	49	6.0	6.1	5.9	5.7	5.9	5.4	6.3	5.6	5.2	5.1	5.9	5.9	5.8	4.9	5.4	5.3	4.8	5.5	6.4	5.7	5.4	6.2
27	20	Lancaster University	77.6	123	5.8	5.7	5.6	5.9	6.1	5.8	6.2	5.7	5.3	5.2	5.5	5.4	6.0	5.1	6.1	6.0	4.9	5.4	5.9	5.4	4.8	6.0
28*	30*	University of Stirling	77.6	44	6.1	6.0	5.6	5.5	5.7	6.0	6.3	5.8	5.6	4.9	5.5	5.5	6.3	5.0	4.8	5.7	4.7	5.2	5.3	6.0	6.6	6.3
29	10	Swansea University	77.5	61	5.8	5.8	5.8	6.0	5.9	5.8	6.0	5.4	5.4	5.5	5.6	5.8	6.0	5.1	5.2	5.2	5.2	5.4	6.2	5.7	5.7	6.2
30=	38	University of Kent	77.3	116	5.8	5.8	5.7	5.7	5.9	5.9	6.2	5.6	5.4	5.4	5.5	5.6	5.9	5.2	5.5	5.8	4.6	5.1	5.9	5.5	5.5	6.1
30=	22	University of Teesside	77.3	127	5.8	5.9	5.4	5.6	5.6	5.5	5.8	5.7	5.6	5.8	5.7	5.7	6.0	5.5	4.8	5.6	5.4	5.5	6.2	5.6	5.6	5.9
32	27	University of Hull	77.2	87	5.9	5.9	5.6	5.9	5.9	5.7	6.0	5.6	5.4	6.0	5.6	5.6	5.7	5.2	4.9	5.5	5.4	5.4	5.7	5.5	5.2	6.1
33	28	The Robert Gordon University	77.2	57	5.8	5.9	5.7	5.9	5.6	5.6	5.8	5.9	5.7	5.5	5.6	5.6	5.1	6.2	4.8	5.6	5.2	5.4	5.3	5.6	6.2	6.1
34	37	University of Lincoln	77.0	121	5.7	5.8	5.6	5.8	5.9	5.5	6.1	5.7	5.4	4.8	5.5	5.9	5.9	5.2	5.6	5.8	4.8	5.3	6.0	5.6	5.3	5.9
35	46	Nottingham Trent University	76.9	192	5.7	5.7	5.6	6.1	5.9	5.7	5.8	5.7	5.4	5.4	5.5	5.6	5.7	5.8	5.1	5.4	5.0	5.4	6.0	5.5	5.3	6.0
36*	-*	University College Falmouth	76.8	40	6.0	5.9	5.9	5.8	5.9	4.9	6.2	5.9	5.6	4.7	5.7	6.0	5.1	5.4	5.9	5.7	4.3	5.4	6.1	5.7	4.9	6.3

successful transition,” Currant says. Bradford’s initiative is just one example of the efforts being made across the sector to improve the student experience, the results of which are captured in *Times Higher Education’s* annual Student Experience Survey, published today.

More than 11,000 full-time undergraduates gave their views on every aspect of university life, from the quality of teaching to student support, social life and institutional facilities.

Unlike other surveys in this field, the attributes rated by students were chosen by students themselves, allowing them to determine the factors they think contribute to a high-quality student experience.

The results of the poll were used to decide the 2009 *Times Higher Education* Award for Most Improved Student Experience, which went to Queen Mary, University of London. There, as at Bradford, building a sense of community has been a key aim.

“In any big city, it is harder to build a sense of community because there are so many different opportunities for people to conduct their social and even their learning lives away from campus,” says Morag Shiach, professor of cultural history and vice-principal (teaching and learning) at Queen Mary.

“The challenge is to provide a strong sense of community and coherence for students in a complex urban environment. That’s what we’ve been trying to do. But we also recognise that some students come to London because they want London – they want that urban environment and they want to immerse themselves in it. I wouldn’t say we want to duplicate the experience of a self-contained campus, but we do want to try to give all the benefits of that in terms of a sense of coherence, accessibility and community.”

Students at Queen Mary rated their university higher in 2009 than in 2008 on almost all of the 21 attributes examined by the survey.

**“Students still have a bar that can be used for dancing and so on, but the balance has changed. Students who might not have been so involved in students’ union life before now are**

Ben Marks, managing director of Opinion-panel, the market-research company that conducted the survey, said: “Queen Mary won the category because, over the past year, not only did its scores for student experience improve more in absolute terms than any other university, but it also showed the largest improvement in the league-table ranking. It was the clear winner.”

The biggest increases were in students’ ratings for facilities and for the students’ union. This coincides with the £6 million revamp of the union building at the college’s Mile End campus in September 2008.

There were also marked improvements in scores for “high-quality staff and lectures”, “good industry connections” and for levels of student support and attention to student welfare.

Sophie Richardson, who is in her final year of a French and linguistics degree, thinks Queen Mary offers the best of both worlds by

combining a close campus community feel with an urban environment.

“What made me apply was the fact that it was a campus and had all the facilities in one place, but it was also ten minutes down the road from the hustle and bustle of London.”

The 22-year-old describes the university’s facilities as “absolutely amazing – I’ve never seen a students’ union like it”. It is particularly important, she says, to have such a focal point for students when they are based in a big city.

According to Shiach, the students’ union was once “a rather unpromising building” that was “very much about bars”. So Queen Mary set out to rethink what a union should be. Now a health and fitness centre is at its heart and it is much more “inclusive”, she says.

“Students still have a bar that can be used for dancing and so on, but the balance has changed,” she observes. “Those who might not have been so involved in students’ union life before now are.”

Other changes have included a new student-support strategy and innovative learning environments sited across the campus.

An informal learning area with IT facilities where students can do group work or snack over their books is known as The Hive – “because bees are associated with both hard work and sociability”, Shiach adds.

“We are very pleased to be improving ahead of the pace of others because we have prioritised this area,” she says of the award.

*Times Higher Education’s* Student Experience poll reveals that for the fourth year in succession, Loughborough University is top of the class, with its students voting their university experience among the best in the land when it comes to sports facilities, the students’ union, the environment on campus and extracurricular activities.

In fact, the top three positions have hardly changed in four years, with the universities of Cambridge and Oxford once again vying for

Rank 2009	Rank 2008	University name	Overall score	Respondents	Weighting 2								1.5							1					I would recommend my university to a friend	
					High-quality staff/lectures	Helpful/interested staff	Well-structured courses	Good social life	Good community atmosphere	Good extracurricular activities/societies	Good environment on campus/around university	High-quality facilities	Personal requirements catered for	Good student union	Good support/welfare	Good personal relationship with teaching staff	Centralised/convenient facilities	Good industry connections	Good accommodation	Good security	Cheap shop/bar/amenities	Tuition in small groups	Good library and library opening hours	Fair workload		Good sports facilities
37	54	University of Gloucestershire	76.8	74	5.8	5.9	5.5	5.9	5.7	5.5	6.0	5.6	5.6	5.4	5.6	6.0	5.6	5.4	5.4	5.4	4.6	5.4	6.0	5.6	5.4	5.9
38	25	University of Liverpool	76.7	89	5.6	5.6	5.4	6.0	5.9	5.9	6.0	5.6	5.3	5.3	5.7	5.6	5.8	5.2	5.1	5.6	5.3	5.2	6.4	5.3	5.7	5.9
39	57	Keele University	76.5	57	5.9	5.7	5.5	5.7	6.1	5.8	6.2	5.4	5.4	5.5	5.7	5.5	5.7	4.9	5.4	5.4	4.8	5.7	5.4	5.3	5.2	6.0
40	50	Northumbria University	76.4	149	5.8	5.8	5.6	5.8	5.7	5.4	5.9	5.8	5.5	5.4	5.5	5.7	5.8	5.4	5.2	5.4	5.0	5.3	6.3	5.4	5.5	6.0
41=	41	University of Plymouth	76.3	190	5.8	5.8	5.6	5.8	5.7	5.6	5.8	5.6	5.4	5.5	5.4	5.7	5.8	5.3	5.3	5.5	5.2	5.0	6.0	5.4	5.0	6.0
41=	36	University of Reading	76.3	117	5.8	5.5	5.5	6.0	5.9	5.9	6.2	5.6	5.3	5.5	5.7	5.3	5.8	5.2	5.3	5.6	4.6	4.9	5.2	5.3	5.6	6.0
43	44	Queen's University Belfast	76.0	149	5.8	5.6	5.6	5.8	5.3	5.8	5.7	5.9	5.3	5.6	5.6	5.4	5.8	5.5	5.3	5.2	4.8	5.2	5.9	5.4	5.9	5.9
44	34	University of Aberdeen	75.9	84	6.0	5.8	6.0	5.9	5.9	6.0	6.1	5.6	5.5	3.3	5.6	5.7	5.8	5.3	4.6	5.5	4.2	5.5	5.7	5.7	5.3	6.1
45	26	University of Strathclyde	75.7	72	5.6	5.6	5.5	6.0	5.6	5.7	5.8	5.4	5.5	5.8	5.4	5.5	5.7	5.7	5.0	5.3	5.3	5.3	5.7	5.3	5.3	6.1
46	73	Staffordshire University	75.6	85	5.7	5.8	5.6	5.0	5.4	5.4	5.9	5.6	5.4	5.3	5.5	5.9	5.6	5.4	5.4	5.6	5.2	5.4	6.1	5.8	5.3	5.6
47	39	University of York	75.6	121	6.1	5.9	5.8	5.7	5.9	5.9	6.1	5.3	5.4	4.6	5.5	5.6	5.7	5.0	5.2	5.5	4.5	5.7	5.5	5.4	4.4	6.1
48*	—*	St George's Medical School	75.4	33	6.1	5.8	5.3	5.4	5.8	5.7	5.9	5.4	5.3	5.7	5.8	5.5	5.3	5.6	5.9	5.0	5.8	5.2	4.9	4.6	6.0	
49*	72*	Southampton Solent University	75.2	34	5.8	5.9	5.4	5.7	5.6	5.4	5.6	5.4	5.5	5.1	5.4	5.9	5.9	5.3	4.9	5.1	5.4	5.7	6.2	5.6	5.0	5.6
50	31	University of Portsmouth	75.2	141	5.6	5.6	5.5	5.8	5.6	5.7	5.7	5.6	5.4	4.9	5.4	5.7	5.8	5.1	5.5	5.7	4.7	5.2	6.1	5.6	5.4	5.8
51	82	Queen Mary, University of London	75.2	104	6.0	5.7	5.6	5.4	5.4	5.5	5.7	5.5	5.2	5.5	5.6	5.5	5.5	5.3	5.6	4.9	5.3	5.9	5.4	5.5	5.9	5.9
52	59	University of Manchester	75.1	221	5.7	5.4	5.5	6.2	5.6	5.9	5.7	5.7	5.2	4.7	5.4	5.2	5.7	5.4	5.4	4.7	5.0	6.1	5.1	5.6	6.1	6.1
53	61	Aston University	75.0	66	5.7	5.5	5.6	5.8	5.9	5.7	5.9	5.2	5.4	5.1	5.5	5.1	6.0	5.8	4.8	4.7	4.9	5.8	5.2	5.1	6.0	6.0
54*	70*	University of Derby	75.0	33	5.5	5.9	5.6	5.6	5.7	5.5	5.9	5.2	5.3	5.4	5.7	5.8	5.5	5.2	5.5	5.3	4.8	5.5	5.9	5.5	4.6	5.5
55	49	University College London	74.8	114	6.1	5.7	5.6	5.6	5.2	5.5	5.7	5.7	5.3	5.3	5.1	5.5	5.8	5.4	5.1	5.7	4.7	5.4	5.9	5.4	4.9	6.1
56	56	Sheffield Hallam University	74.8	159	5.6	5.6	5.2	5.9	5.7	5.4	5.7	5.7	5.3	5.4	5.3	5.7	5.6	5.3	5.2	5.5	4.8	5.3	6.2	5.3	5.1	5.8
57	53	Glasgow Caledonian University	74.6	72	5.9	5.8	5.6	5.4	5.6	5.4	5.9	5.9	5.4	3.5	5.5	6.0	5.9	5.4	5.1	5.4	3.8	5.4	6.1	5.7	5.4	6.3
58	45	King's College London	74.6	101	6.0	5.6	5.6	5.7	5.4	5.5	5.7	5.5	5.2	5.6	5.4	5.5	5.5	5.3	5.1	5.7	4.7	5.0	6.1	5.3	4.8	6.1
59	75*	Brunel University	74.4	64	5.4	5.4	5.3	5.6	5.4	5.6	5.8	5.7	5.2	5.5	5.5	5.3	5.8	5.3	5.7	5.6	5.0	4.7	5.6	5.3	5.9	5.6
60*	24	Heriot-Watt University	74.1	35	5.4	5.3	5.3	5.6	5.4	5.5	6.0	5.5	5.4	5.1	5.5	5.3	5.5	5.7	5.4	4.9	5.3	5.5	5.3	5.6	5.9	5.9
61	60	Imperial College London	73.9	111	5.9	5.5	5.7	5.0	5.0	5.8	5.5	6.0	5.2	4.5	5.0	5.3	5.8	5.7	5.4	4.4	5.1	6.4	4.6	6.0	5.8	5.8
62	76	De Montfort University	73.6	83	5.5	5.6	5.5	5.6	5.3	5.2	5.5	5.7	5.2	5.3	5.3	5.6	5.7	5.3	5.1	4.6	5.2	6.4	5.4	4.7	5.6	5.6
63	74	Bath Spa University	73.4	64	6.0	6.1	5.8	5.4	5.9	5.1	6.2	5.2	5.3	4.8	5.4	6.0	4.8	5.0	5.0	5.1	5.5	5.5	5.6	5.6	3.6	5.7
64	58	Bournemouth University	73.3	128	5.4	5.5	5.2	5.7	5.5	5.5	5.7	5.4	5.3	5.3	5.3	5.5	5.2	5.5	5.3	4.8	5.0	5.9	5.4	5.1	5.8	5.8
65	65	University of the West of England	73.3	207	5.6	5.6	5.3	5.6	5.5	5.4	5.7	5.6	5.2	5.2	5.2	5.5	5.2	5.1	5.1	4.7	5.2	6.2	5.4	5.4	5.8	5.8
66	55	Leeds Metropolitan University	73.1	143	5.1	5.5	5.0	5.7	5.4	5.3	5.8	5.7	5.1	4.7	5.3	5.6	5.5	5.3	5.5	4.6	5.1	6.4	5.4	5.9	5.4	5.4
67	69	University of Chester	72.5	61	5.6	5.7	5.4	5.4	5.6	5.4	5.9	5.2	5.2	5.0	5.5	5.7	5.4	4.9	4.4	4.8	5.4	5.3	5.3	5.3	4.8	5.7
68	47	University of Bristol	72.3	145	5.9	5.8	5.6	6.1	5.5	5.9	5.8	5.3	5.3	3.5	5.3	5.3	4.8	5.2	5.3	3.6	5.0	4.9	5.2	5.3	6.1	6.1
69	63	Royal Holloway, University of London	72.1	59	6.0	5.7	5.4	4.9	5.3	5.7	5.9	5.5	5.1	4.2	5.4	5.5	5.5	4.7	5.5	3.8	5.2	5.6	5.5	5.3	5.6	5.6
70	90	Canterbury Christ Church University	71.8	78	5.7	5.7	5.4	5.2	5.5	5.0	5.8	5.3	5.2	4.6	5.5	5.9	5.3	5.1	4.9	4.4	5.2	5.5	5.4	4.6	5.7	5.7
71	48	University of Huddersfield	71.8	97	5.7	5.7	5.4	5.1	5.3	4.8	5.7	5.7	5.2	4.6	5.2	5.8	5.7	5.4	4.6	4.5	5.4	6.1	5.4	4.6	5.7	5.7

second and third places. According to Opinionpanel's Marks, this stability shows that polling accurately reflects student opinion.

New to the top ten, Marks adds, are the universities of Leeds, Dundee and Glasgow, while the institutions showing the greatest improvement since last year, alongside Queen Mary, are Canterbury Christ Church and Staffordshire universities. "What we've been trying to do is have a much more holistic approach to the student and the student experience," explains Margaret Andrews, pro vice-chancellor for students at Canterbury Christ Church University, where nearly half of students study part time and 60 per cent are on professional courses.

"The experience for mature part-time students who might be holding down full-time employment – perhaps at a senior level – is quite different from the experience that full-time undergraduate students have.

"In turn, both of those experiences are

different from that of international students.

"So we have been trying to reflect in our student services the totality of the student body rather than concentrating on the full-time undergraduate, which is what a lot of universities have done until fairly recently."

Canterbury Christ Church has built a £35 million library and student-services centre, has developed a new student-service model called Student First, and is working closely with the students' union.

"We have a good relationship with the students' union," says Andrews, "but by the nature of the job, the sabbatical officers are students who have been full time and are fairly young, so they have to work harder at engaging with the mature student population, who don't always see what the union has to offer them."

As head of student experience for the faculty of development and society at Sheffield Hallam University, Mark O'Hara deals with many of the same issues. With 12,000

students, including close to 4,500 studying part time, the university's faculty is "massively diverse", says O'Hara, who spoke at a recent 1994 Group and Neil Stewart Associates conference on the student experience.

"We have a fair proportion of mature students on full-time routes who share lots of the characteristics you would regard traditionally as being part time. We also have lots of younger full-time students who are seeking employment while they study, and in that sense have a lot of the commitments that could be seen as being more akin to the part-time student experience.

"The boundary between full- and part-time study is becoming increasingly blurred."

He finds, however, that too many systems are still geared towards the full-time undergraduate – something he is on a mission to change.

"If you are coming in only between 5pm and 8pm on a Wednesday evening, or on a Saturday, and you need some help or assis-

“Full-time students are generally better able to access support services such as the learning centre, the careers service and the students' union. We are working to make access to such facilities and services more equitable”

TOP INSTITUTIONS BY MISSION GROUP		
Mission group	University	Overall rank
Million+	University of Central Lancashire	18
1994 Group	Loughborough University	1
Russell Group	University of Cambridge	2
University Alliance	Aberystwyth University	6

tance with your academic writing, for example, how would you get that? These are some of the questions we've been addressing.

"Full-time students are generally better able to access some of those services that support learning, teaching and assessment – the learning centre, academic advice and guidance, the careers service and the students' union. We are working to make access to such facilities and services more equitable."

The faculty has begun to offer weekend sessions that allow students to "drop in" for help when they come into town on a Saturday to do their shopping. Other changes that cater for students with external commitments include being more accommodating about the hours during which work can be handed in.

"The higher education framework document that Lord Mandelson recently produced indicates that universities need to be more flexible and better able to serve the needs of diverse groups of students," O'Hara points out.

One shift in this direction that is apparent across the sector is the move towards 24-hour libraries.

The University of Sheffield has made the leap and, according to Paul White, its pro vice-chancellor for learning and teaching, it is no coincidence that this is an area in which the institution scored highly in *Times Higher Education's* survey.

"It isn't a conventional library," he explains. "We found that students want to work with a book open but with Google running at the same time. We call it the Information Commons. It is a place where many different sources of information can be brought together, and it is collaborative – students can work together. It literally is open 24-7, 365 days a year. Last year, we had about 40 students in there on Christmas Day."

The advent of top-up fees is often linked to increasing pressure on universities to improve the student experience. It is



Rank 2009	Rank 2008	University name	Overall score	Respondents	Weighting 2										1.5						1					I would recommend my university to a friend
					High-quality staff/lectures	Helpful/interested staff	Well-structured courses	Good social life	Good community atmosphere	Good extracurricular activities/societies	Good environment on campus/around university	High-quality facilities	Personal requirements catered for	Good student union	Good support/welfare	Good personal relationship with teaching staff	Centralised/convenient facilities	Good industry connections	Good accommodation	Good security	Cheap shop/bar/amenities	Tuition in small groups	Good library and library opening hours	Fair workload	Good sports facilities	
72=*	42*	York St John University College	71.8	31	5.6	5.8	5.5	5.3	5.5	5.2	5.9	5.4	4.7	4.4	5.3	5.8	5.7	4.5	5.0	5.2	4.7	5.2	5.5	5.5	5.0	5.7
72=*	-*	University of Wales Institute, Cardiff	71.8	41	5.7	5.6	5.7	5.6	5.5	4.5	5.4	5.5	5.3	3.9	5.2	5.8	5.2	5.0	5.3	5.5	4.1	5.0	5.6	5.4	6.0	5.6
74	62	University of Glamorgan	71.6	84	5.8	5.8	5.5	5.2	5.3	4.8	5.5	5.5	5.4	4.5	5.2	5.7	5.2	5.1	5.0	5.3	4.2	5.1	5.9	5.6	4.9	5.8
75	80*	University of Salford	71.2	58	5.7	5.8	5.4	5.1	5.2	5.1	5.3	5.3	5.3	4.8	5.3	5.5	5.3	5.6	4.6	5.2	4.2	5.2	6.0	5.4	5.1	5.7
76*	67	Roehampton University	71.1	47	5.6	5.4	5.3	5.3	5.3	5.0	5.8	5.4	5.0	5.0	5.4	5.6	5.1	4.6	5.3	5.4	4.5	4.8	5.7	5.8	4.8	5.5
77	64	Manchester Metropolitan University	71.1	131	5.1	5.4	5.0	5.8	5.3	5.1	5.4	5.2	5.2	4.9	5.2	5.4	5.6	5.1	5.2	5.3	4.8	5.1	5.8	5.3	5.0	5.5
78*	-*	University of Northampton	70.8	42	5.6	5.7	5.6	5.2	5.4	4.9	5.9	5.2	5.2	3.9	5.2	5.8	5.1	4.9	5.3	5.4	3.9	5.2	5.7	5.5	4.6	5.5
79	86	University of Sunderland	70.8	61	5.4	5.4	5.2	5.5	5.4	5.2	5.6	5.3	5.1	4.8	5.2	5.6	5.3	5.0	4.7	5.4	4.5	5.1	6.1	5.2	4.8	5.3
80	83	Kingston University	70.7	121	5.6	5.7	5.3	5.3	5.0	5.1	5.6	5.4	5.1	4.6	5.2	5.5	5.1	5.0	5.1	5.4	4.7	4.9	6.1	5.5	4.4	5.4
81*	85*	University of Bradford	70.6	33	5.7	5.8	5.4	5.1	5.1	5.0	5.4	5.0	5.1	4.8	5.2	5.7	5.5	5.0	4.8	5.3	4.8	5.0	5.9	5.6	4.7	5.4
82	68	Oxford Brookes University	70.5	99	5.5	5.4	5.4	5.4	5.2	5.1	5.6	5.3	5.0	4.9	5.3	5.5	4.9	5.1	4.9	5.2	4.5	4.8	5.6	5.4	5.1	5.7
83	77	University of Ulster	70.3	61	5.7	5.7	5.6	4.9	5.3	5.0	5.4	5.4	5.2	4.1	5.2	5.6	5.3	5.0	4.3	5.7	3.8	5.0	5.9	5.5	5.5	5.8
84	78	Coventry University	69.9	82	5.3	5.4	5.2	5.4	5.1	5.2	5.3	5.3	5.1	4.5	5.1	5.6	5.5	5.2	4.9	5.2	4.6	4.9	5.7	5.3	5.2	5.1
85	89	University of Brighton	69.4	106	5.7	5.7	5.3	5.6	5.4	4.9	5.4	5.0	5.2	4.3	5.2	5.7	4.5	4.8	4.9	5.2	3.9	5.2	5.7	5.4	4.5	5.8
86	66	University of Hertfordshire	68.9	138	5.4	5.4	5.1	4.7	4.8	4.9	5.2	5.5	5.1	4.6	5.0	5.4	5.3	5.2	5.2	5.0	4.0	4.8	6.4	5.3	5.7	5.2
87*	71	University of Bedfordshire	68.6	44	5.5	5.5	5.3	4.7	5.0	4.8	5.4	5.2	5.0	4.5	5.4	5.7	5.3	5.0	4.6	5.1	3.7	5.0	5.8	5.3	5.1	5.3
88*	-*	Queen Margaret University	68.5	35	5.4	5.7	5.1	4.9	5.0	4.9	5.5	5.4	5.3	3.9	5.1	5.6	4.1	4.6	5.1	5.9	4.0	5.3	5.4	5.6	5.0	5.2
89	87	London School of Economics	68.4	73	5.4	4.9	5.3	5.0	4.7	4.8	5.1	5.1	5.0	5.0	5.1	4.9	5.7	6.5	4.8	5.6	4.7	4.8	6.1	5.2	3.2	5.7
90*	88*	Royal Veterinary College	68.2	43	6.1	5.9	5.3	4.7	5.2	4.7	5.3	5.5	4.8	4.1	5.2	5.3	4.3	5.3	5.2	5.5	3.4	4.7	5.8	5.0	4.2	5.4
91	92	Anglia Ruskin University	68.1	71	5.3	5.5	4.9	4.8	5.1	4.7	5.3	5.2	4.9	4.9	5.1	5.6	5.2	4.8	4.6	5.2	4.8	5.3	6.0	5.2	4.4	5.0
92	97	Birmingham City University	67.7	109	5.6	5.5	5.4	5.1	4.9	4.5	5.1	5.1	5.1	4.8	5.0	5.4	4.9	5.2	4.7	5.5	4.3	4.7	5.9	5.2	3.8	5.5
93	81	University of Wolverhampton	67.5	72	5.3	5.4	5.0	4.8	5.1	4.8	5.5	5.3	4.9	4.0	5.2	5.5	5.3	5.0	4.4	5.1	4.1	4.8	5.9	5.3	5.0	5.0
94	79	Liverpool John Moores University	67.2	103	5.1	5.1	4.9	5.4	5.2	4.6	5.3	5.2	4.9	4.6	4.9	5.3	4.9	4.8	4.9	5.3	4.3	4.9	6.0	5.4	4.4	5.1
95*	91*	Goldsmiths, University of London	66.9	42	5.7	5.4	5.0	5.0	5.0	4.7	5.0	5.0	4.9	4.9	5.0	5.1	5.3	4.7	4.7	5.1	4.5	4.6	5.6	5.2	4.5	5.4
96	93	Edinburgh Napier University	65.5	63	5.3	5.4	5.0	4.8	5.0	4.7	5.2	5.3	5.1	3.5	5.0	5.5	4.8	5.0	4.0	5.2	4.1	4.8	5.4	5.4	4.1	5.0
97*	94	London South Bank University	64.9	44	5.3	5.6	5.5	4.3	4.6	3.9	4.8	4.9	5.0	3.9	4.8	5.5	5.4	5.1	4.4	5.3	4.0	4.8	5.8	5.7	4.5	5.0
98*	95	City University London	64.6	44	5.1	5.2	5.1	4.6	4.6	4.9	4.9	5.0	5.0	4.2	4.8	5.0	4.9	5.7	4.4	5.1	4.0	4.4	5.6	4.9	4.3	5.3
99	96	University of Greenwich	63.9	67	5.2	5.4	5.2	4.2	4.5	4.0	5.1	5.1	5.1	3.9	4.9	5.4	4.9	4.9	4.4	4.9	4.3	4.7	5.9	5.0	4.3	5.0
100*	-*	University of the Arts London	62.8	40	5.2	5.2	4.8	4.6	4.4	3.8	4.8	5.1	4.7	4.4	4.4	5.4	5.0	6.1	4.1	5.2	4.9	5.0	5.4	5.4	2.7	5.4
101	98	Middlesex University	61.4	51	5.0	5.2	4.7	4.4	4.4	4.1	5.1	5.1	4.8	3.9	4.7	5.4	4.9	4.8	3.9	4.7	3.4	4.7	5.3	5.0	4.8	4.7
102	100	University of Westminster	60.4	76	5.1	5.1	4.9	4.2	4.2	3.9	4.5	4.8	4.5	4.1	4.4	5.1	4.8	4.5	4.4	5.3	3.9	4.7	5.8	4.9	4.3	4.5
103*	99	London Metropolitan University	55.2	37	4.5	5.1	4.6	3.8	3.9	3.8	4.2	4.0	4.1	4.0	4.1	5.4	4.6	4.1	3.6	5.2	3.5	4.4	4.9	5.0	4.3	3.8
104*	101	University of East London	54.2	41	4.8	4.4	4.4	3.9	4.2	3.7	4.6	4.2	4.3	3.5	4.2	5.0	4.2	4.6	4.4	4.2	3.4	3.7	5.6	4.7	3.0	4.5
Totals/averages			74.0	10,465	5.7	5.7	5.5	5.5	5.5	5.4	5.8	5.5	5.3	5.0	5.4	5.6	5.5	5.2	5.2	5.5	4.7	5.2	5.9	5.4	5.2	5.8

Note: Only universities with more than 30 ratings are included in the final analysis. \*Denotes a small sample size (between 30 and 50)

often argued that students have grown more aware of their “consumer” rights and are thus becoming more demanding.

What is perhaps less frequently observed is that fees have caused financial transactions to become a more prominent feature of the student experience. Universities neglect this at their peril, according to Julia Owens, higher education specialist at the Financial Services Authority (FSA).

To get her message across, Owens asked delegates at the 1994 Group and Neil Stewart Associates student experience conference to brainstorm and list the ways in which financial difficulties and constraints could affect university study.

The resulting list was long. It included the need to undertake part-time employment, issues to do with attendance, academic performance, progression, students’ ability to participate in extracurricular and personal-development

activities, engage with the social side of life at university and their mental wellbeing.

The exercise showed clearly that poor financial capability affects a broad range of higher education agendas, from widening participation and recruitment to academic performance and retention. But despite its importance, financial knowhow is lacking in students, FSA research indicates.

The organisation’s Money Doctors project helps universities provide programmes to raise students’ awareness of personal finance.

“We are trying to get student money advisers to work in a much more proactive and educative way, working with students at key points in the student life cycle,” Owens explains.

This includes dispelling myths about student finance before young people apply to university – for example, helping them to understand that the student loan is a graduate

contribution so that they “gain a sense of good debt and bad debt”.

In later years, it means helping them to manage their finances while at university and preparing them to save for pensions while paying off their student loans and trying to get a foot on the housing ladder.

“The conclusion we drew at the conference was that if higher education institutions sit up and recognise how important financial capability is and what contribution it can make, they will be in a better position to send out confident and capable graduates who have had a very positive student experience. Otherwise, lack of financial capability is a handicap that can impact on the whole experience,” Owens says.

**W**hen it comes to a good experience of teaching and learning, bridging the gap between school and higher

### TOP 10 FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teaching and learning attributes: high-quality staff/lectures, helpful/interested staff, well-structured courses, good personal relationship with teaching staff, tuition in small groups, fair workload

Rank	University	Overall rank	Score
1	University of Oxford	3	86.81
2	University of Cambridge	2	86.56
3	University of St Andrews	14	84.30
4	Aberystwyth University	6	83.15
5	University of Leicester	13	81.94
6	University of Sussex	26*	81.40
7	Bath Spa University	63	81.18
8	University of Dundee	8	81.06
9	University College Falmouth	36*	80.81
10	University of Exeter	11	80.75

\*Small sample (30-50 responses)

### MOST IMPROVED SINCE LAST YEAR

To determine which universities had improved the most, Opinionpanel calculated the difference in the overall score for each university between 2008 and 2009 and then used it to rank institutions. Queen Mary, University of London won the Times Higher Education Award for Most Improved Student Experience 2009. Its score was the most improved year on year and also showed the greatest advancement in terms of rank.

University	Difference in score ('08 to '09)	Rank 2008	Rank 2009	
1	Queen Mary, University of London	5.93	82	51
2	Canterbury Christ Church University	5.72	90	70
3	Staffordshire University	4.82	73	46

### TOP 10 FOR FACILITIES

Facilities attributes: high-quality facilities, good student union, centralised/convenient facilities, good accommodation, cheap shop/bar/amenities, good library and library opening hours, good sports facilities

University	Overall rank	Score	
1	Loughborough University	1	87.88
2	University of Sheffield	4	83.96
3	University of East Anglia	5	82.77
4	University of Southampton	9	81.92
5	University of Dundee	8	81.87
6	University of Leeds	7	81.26
7	University of Central Lancashire	18	81.18
8	University of Glasgow	10	81.04
9	Aberystwyth University	6	80.06
10	University of Warwick	16	78.61

## MISSION-GROUP PRESENCE IN TOP 20

Mission group	Number of institutions in the top 20	Proportion of the top 20 that the mission group takes	Proportion of the mission group in the top 20
Russell Group	10	50%	50%
1994 Group	7	35%	37%
University Alliance	1	5%	4.5%
Million+	1	5%	3.5%

## TOP INSTITUTIONS BY REGION

Region	University	Overall rank
East Midlands	Loughborough University	1
Eastern	University of Cambridge	2
London	St George's Medical School	48*
North East	Durham University	12
North West	University of Central Lancashire	18
Northern Ireland	Queen's University Belfast	43
Scotland	University of Dundee	8
South East	University of Oxford	3
South West	University of Exeter	11
Wales	Aberystwyth University	6
West Midlands	University of Warwick	16
Yorkshire & Humberside	University of Sheffield	4

\* Small sample (30-50 responses)

education is critical, the conference heard.

Jo Smedley, associate dean of learning and teaching at Newport Business School, part of the University of Wales, Newport, has devised a system that “reaches out” to students the minute they are accepted to university.

The project, which she began in her former job at Aston University, was a response to the fact that some new students were having difficulties with undergraduate-level academic work despite having entered higher education with high examination grades.

“They had been familiar at school with bite-sized chunks of learning. At university, the focus is much more on deep knowledge rather than surface knowledge, but they didn’t have the building blocks, the scaffolding,” she explains.

Smedley questioned whether students had to embark on such a large first step in week one. Working closely with students, she discovered that the answer was “no”.

Aston developed 12 study skills modules focused on introductory issues, such as how to write essays, for students to work through before the formal start of their course.

“The purpose was to try to raise students’ awareness of the university experience before they arrived. It helped to set their expectations and explain what university was about,” Smedley explains.

Now she is developing the concept at Newport by applying it to its MBA programme, which has a large intake of international students, and by updating the system to make the most of social-networking tools such as Facebook and podcasts.

“At Aston, we found that students who participated were more self-aware of their learning needs and displayed greater self-confidence [in managing the transition],” she enthuses.

In *Times Higher Education’s* survey, the institutions deemed to offer the best teaching and learning student experience are the universities of Oxford, Cambridge, St Andrews, Aberystwyth, Leicester, Sussex, Bath Spa, Dundee, University College Falmouth and Exeter.

Those providing students with the best facilities are the universities of Loughborough, Sheffield, East Anglia, Southampton, Dundee, Leeds, Central Lancashire, Glasgow, Aberystwyth and Warwick.

The universities of Sheffield, Leeds and Newcastle were rated as having the best social life, and Cambridge the most helpful and interested staff.

But for many universities, the most important factor of all is whether students would recommend them to friends.

The weightings in *Times Higher Education’s* survey are designed to reflect this – they are decided by correlating scores for each survey attribute against the likelihood that students would recommend their university.

This “word of mouth” factor is often closely monitored by universities in their own internal student surveys. Sheffield, which scores well on this measure, is no exception.

“We look for the extent to which our students have become our marketing tools,” White explains.

This is not about attempting to manipulate students, he stresses. Rather, the fact that today’s students can so freely and easily spread the word and have their say online is a strong incentive for universities to do their utmost to ensure that they offer a positive experience.

“We recognise that the university doesn’t control its messages any more,” White says.

“Through their blogs, their communication on social-networking sites and everywhere else, there are 24,000 students who are marketing us daily.” ●



JEFF MORGAN EDUCATION/ALAMY

**“We recognise that the university does not control its messages any more”**

### THE FINER POINTS OF THE POINTS

*Times Higher Education’s* Student Experience Survey brings together the views of more than 11,000 full-time undergraduates.

Between September 2008 and June 2009, market-research agency Opinionpanel asked students to rate their university on 21 different attributes that are key to a positive student experience.

All respondents were members of Opinionpanel’s Student Panel, a group recruited through an email invitation sent via the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service.

The attributes rated were chosen by students themselves. When the survey was designed, Opinionpanel asked 1,000 students to describe, unprompted and in their own words, how their university contributed to a positive

and negative student experience.

The results from this exercise were coded and used to form the 21 different features of university life rated by the survey.

Panel members were asked to rate how their university performed on each, using a seven-point scale.

They were not told the purpose of the exercise.

Each university’s score has been indexed to give a percentage of the maximum attainable score.

The weightings for each attribute were determined by correlating scores for each against the likelihood that a student would recommend their university to their friends.

● For further details on the survey, go to [www.timeshighereducation.co.uk](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk)