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| **Beds SU Policy Ideal: A Holistic Service Level Agreement (SLA) for the University of Bedfordshire** |
| **Beds SU believes**… *that a basic holistic Service Level Agreement (SLA) between the University of Bedfordshire as a whole (the provider) and its students (the customers) should be instated, to ensure that* ***a high standard of academic, administrative and welfare support is available to enrolled students on all courses and across all UoB sites.*** |
| **What are the facts?**  Following on from student feedback gathered primarily from SVFs and the Beds SU 2021 Student Survey, Beds SU has been made aware that many students feel that various processes and services administered by the university fall short of expectations. See below a summary of student data and feedback accounts relating to perceived shortcomings in service provision on the part of the University of Bedfordshire (UoB).   1. **Lack of university-wide policy adherence by some UoB Faculties**   Although many UoB academic quality and welfare processes and policies exist which should apply *across all University of Bedfordshire faculties* – such as the PAT policy and the Quality Handbook – Beds SU has compiled data which suggests **a significant discrepancy in the services offered across the different faculties**. For example, the Beds SU 2021 survey, which was completed by almost 1,000 students, found that UBBS had the highest student feedback ratings for academic experience and support, whilst EES had the lowest. That is, over 48% of UBBS students surveyed felt they received sufficient academic support on their course, compared with just 23.2% of EES students. These figures suggest that there is insufficient university-wide monitoring taking place to ensure that all courses adhere to existing university-wide academic provision and welfare policies. Further student reports gathered from the October round of Student Voice Forums (SVFs) provide additional evidence supporting **a lack of university-wide policy adherence on some courses**. For example, a number of students based in the CATS faculty, which had the second lowest Beds SU survey rating for academic support, reported to receiving insufficient academic support from their PATs.   1. **Inadequate communications/information materials on some courses**   A number of students in the School of Art & Design reported during the SVFs that they were unaware of the role carried out by PATs. This suggests **inadequate information communications from the university**, as students do not appear to have been sent the PAT handbook at the beginning of term – as per the PAT policy – which would clarify the responsibilities of PATs for students.   1. **Delayed response times**   Students across numerous courses have approached Beds SU over poor communications from the University, both with respects to academic and administrative staff. For example, a number of UoB students have reported to being disadvantaged by delayed response times from general administrative services at the university, such as the Student Information Desk (SID). That is, during the SVF for Allied Health & Midwifery, a second-year Physiotherapy student told the forum that they use a student railcard which must be verified by SID every year, and SID has not replied to the students’ emails requesting verification. If not resolved promptly, this would result in the student incurring extra costs for travel to and from campus. As such, slow responses from vital university services can cause significant stress, and even financial hardship, for students. Additionally, students have reported delayed response times from academic staff to the SU. For example, a group of final year Nursing student approached the SU with concerns over the new performance evaluation process and were particularly distressed as their course coordinator had failed to respond to email enquiries seeking clarification.   1. **Insufficient assessment feedback**   Finally, some students have approached Beds SU with **concerns over assessment feedback provided by university staff.** For example, a business student reported that a number of students on the course had received nearly identical feedback, despite some students scoring a first-class mark, and others scoring a third. As such, students have questioned the validity and usefulness of the feedback provided on their course. The University has already set out minimum expectations of its teaching practices, available in Chapter 11 of the Quality Handbook, which stipulate that a detailed and comprehensive assignment brief for each assignment and associated grading criteria must be available to students, and grading must sufficiently be justified following that prespecified grading criteria. However, similar to the PAT policy, evidence from student feedback reports suggests a lack of adherence to the Quality Handbook on some courses. |
| **How does this impact students?**  Insufficient provision of academic, administrative and welfare services by university providers can negatively impact students in a variety of ways. In particular, research indicates that negative institutional factors can contribute to a lack of retention of students, as well as heightened stress and poor academic performance amongst students.  NSS data provides substantial evidence that institutional factors can impact university dropout rates, meaning that students who feel they are receiving low levels of support from their university provider may be more inclined to withdraw from their studies. For example, a 2017 report by the University Partnerships Programme (UPP) found a correlation –through analysis of NSS survey data – between low levels of student satisfaction and high non-completion rates[[1]](#footnote-1).  Furthermore, a number of students have also informed Beds SU that poor service provision from the university – particularly delayed waiting times to important academic and administrative queries – had caused them to experience increased levels of stress and anxiety, which is particularly alarming in a higher education setting given that stress is a commonly reported impediment to overall academic performance. For example, in a 2019 national survey run by the American College Health Association (ACHA), more than 34% of college students surveyed felt that stress was the biggest detriment to their academic performance[[2]](#footnote-2).  Finally, research suggests that student dissatisfaction with feedback can stunt academic development. That is, as Deeley et al (2019) note, it is vital that feedback is used effectively, as constructive, comprehensive and intelligible feedback can help students improve their academic performance as they progress through their studies[[3]](#footnote-3). |
| **What is the Beds SU ideal?**  *Given the substantial feedback Beds SU has received regarding perceived shortcomings in the provision of certain services and procedures on the part of the university, as well as inconsistencies in the provision of vital services by differing faculties, the SU believes that a basic SLA between the UoB (the provider) and students (the clients) should be instated. The SU proposes that this SLA should include the following:*  **Provider Responsibilities:**   * To ensure that all academic related student enquiries are handled by the relevant UoB party (i.e. course coordinators, teaching staff) within a prespecified time period (i.e. 2 working days) * To ensure that all general, administrative and welfare enquiries are handled by the relevant UoB party (i.e. SID) within a prespecified time period (i.e. 3 working days) * In instances where such response timeframes are not upheld, the provider should outline and follow a set process for enquiry resolution/escalation, and make this information clearly visible to students via the UoB website * All academic staff should be effectively briefed on the nature of general UoB administrative and pastoral services – such as SID, student finance and advice services – so as to effectively signpost students who contact them to the most relevant university service offering * To carry out monitoring procedures/ an internal audit at AB level so to ensure that university-wide processes and policies – such as the PAT Policy and the Quality Handbook - are being upheld across all courses offered by the university. * To ensure that students on all courses are provided with sufficient information materials – such as a course handbook and the student PAT handbook – at the beginning of every academic year * To ensure that information regarding university policies, procedures and services is made clear and accessible to students on the provider website * To ensure that students are provided with an accurate timetable – including both class times and locations – prior to every academic term |

1. UPP 2017 report: https://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/UPP-final-report.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ACHA 2019 report: ttps://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/NCHA-II\_SPRING\_2019\_US\_REFERENCE\_GROUP\_EXECUTIVE\_SUMMARY.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Deeley et al (2019) article: http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/190206/7/190206.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-3)