

Liberal Arts and GSD Student Equity Survey 2021

Background

As a School, we are committed to providing fair, equitable and accessible education for all our students. We believe that all members of our community should be treated equally, without discrimination. We recognise that there are structural barriers which may prevent engagement, success or progression, and we are committed to eliminating them. We recognise that we will not always get this right.

In Staff and Student Liaison Committees you have asked us to explore how we might take a proactive leadership role in discussing and addressing issues such as systemic ableism and racism in our University, with a view to advocating for equality and egalitarianism.

In March 2021 we surveyed all year groups to understand your experiences and hear your ideas. 80 of you responded. In this report some data is presented in percentages. Some of these refer to a relatively small number of responses; e.g. responses from Liberal Arts students, or those from some demographic groups. As a result, they may not always reflect the cohorts they represent perfectly.

Key findings

Overall, the School was perceived as welcoming, inclusive and equitable. Students praised both the teaching and the culture of the School, and appreciated the approach of its staff. No cases of direct discrimination were reported.

There is, of course, room to improve. Some students shared examples of negative experiences. As we had hoped, many of you offered suggestions relating to mental health, disability, gender, “race” and social privilege.

Individual comments are not included in this report, but they have been read and discussed.

Thanks to those of you who gave your time.

Transition to University Studies

The period when you transition from school to university-level study impacts students in different ways. Our goal is to create an environment where each and every student feels confident negotiating the demands of University.

From a list of pre-set options, prior to starting University most students were concerned about whether their previous educational experience had prepared them academically for the demands of the degree and the social aspects of the programme.

Students who qualified for the higher levels of financial support also cited long- and short-term financial concerns.

Of students from ethnic minorities, 57% were concerned with experiencing direct or indirect discrimination, compared to 17% of white students. Students with a trans history also reported concerns about discrimination.

Students identified financial concerns; e.g. not being able to afford accommodation, or not being able to take out a student loan for faith-based reasons. Some international students were concerned about the impact of not being a native English speaker.

While most of you found that communication from the School, Welcome Week activities and Principles and Praxis helped to alleviate these concerns, some felt that more could be done.

Suggestions included basic introductory sessions on how University works, avoiding assumptions about the “typical student” or students’ prior knowledge, greater support for students with disabilities, more skills training and more social events.

Teaching and learning

Regarding the teaching of gender in the School:

- 73% respondents found it good/superb
- No substantial difference in responses among different gender categories
- No substantial difference between Liberal Arts and GSD

Regarding the teaching of racialised experiences in the School:

- 73% respondents found it good/superb
- No substantial difference in responses among different ethnicity categories
- No substantial difference between Liberal Arts and GSD

In Liberal Arts/GSD modules taken thus far, to what extent do you feel that the curriculum represents a range of voices and ideas?:

- 80% found it good/superb
- Female students (92%) agreed more strongly than male students (72%); numbers of non-binary students are too low to meaningfully present percentage figures but responses did not indicate a cause for concern
- No substantial difference for students of an ethnic minority, or students who are LGBTUA+
- No substantial difference between Liberal Arts and GSD

Teaching and learning (cont.)

Regarding the curriculum, some students celebrated the range of perspectives they encountered; others felt that a more diverse curriculum was still needed. Students had different views about what was missing from the curriculum, and what diversity meant to them in the context of their studies. Some of you felt that students should play a more active role in module design. While some of you wanted staff to go deeper into issues of systemic oppression, not all agreed.

A number of students wanted more content around trans (and, more generally, queer) issues, and some of you felt that a little more care could be taken when discussing trans issues and those that may impact trans students.

Students praised particular modules and teachers for their teaching on topics such as gender and “race.” Some of you told us that your modules had transformed your world view.

You found much to celebrate about the inclusivity of teaching methods used in the School. In particular, you welcomed the fact that group discussions position students as co-creators of knowledge, hold learners accountable, and provide opportunities for all students to participate in the class.

You recognised other examples of good practice, including being praised by staff and other students, being encouraged to talk about personal experiences, and the accommodation of disability needs.

Around half of you stated that, to at least some extent, your learning environment has acted as a barrier to your full participation in modules. Many of these responses related to Covid-19 and the challenges of online learning.

Other issues pertained to accessibility for students with disabilities or learning difficulties; e.g. seminar material being available in plenty of time before the class, lecture recordings.

Culture and community

Regarding gender equity in the School, 85% of you rated the culture as good or superb.

You commented on the preponderance of female students, a sector-wide issue in the arts, humanities and social sciences which we would also like to see change.

While you praised the visibility of women in the School and the School’s approach to gender equity, you thought that many female staff are white, middle-class and of a similar age.

Regarding racial equality in the School, 66% of you rated the culture as good or superb (considerably lower than the rating for gender). 71% of respondents from ethnic minorities rated the culture as good or superb. The major criticism was the whiteness of the staff body.

Regarding other equity issues, you flagged issues around mental health, and suggested that there should be more representation for various equity issues on the SSLCs.

Discrimination

When asked if you would feel comfortable raising issues relating to inclusion and equity with Liberal Arts/GSD staff, 58% agreed, 32% said sometimes and 7% disagreed. A few of you shared negative experiences, but most respondents commented favourably on staff approachability, receptiveness and the fact that staff seem genuinely to care about students.

No respondents reported experiencing direct discrimination in the School. Six respondents reported experiencing indirect discrimination. Where details were given, the incidents concerned different issues. These cases have been shared with staff, with the aim of eliminating such experiences.

None of you reported ever being in a position where you had to or wanted to report a case of discrimination in Liberal Arts/GSD. You did, however, ask to receive more frequent reminders about options for reporting such incidents and a way to report incidents other than through module and personal tutors.

Belonging

Students reported feeling an increasing sense of belonging as they progress through their studies. By final year, 80% of you report feeling a sense of belonging to a “great” extent. Across all years, 90% feel a sense of belonging to either a “moderate” or “great” extent. This compares to 83% of disabled students, 76% of LBTQUA+ students, and 86% of students from minority ethnicities.

Suggestions for improvement were around having more events and socials.

86% of you felt supported to a “great” or “moderate” extent in GSD or Liberal Arts. There is no significant difference between different population groups.

Suggestions for improvement include more frequent meetings with module and personal tutors, improved disability procedures, and making support options (e.g. through temporary withdrawal) more widely known.

What are we doing?

Some immediate short-term actions have been taken; e.g. in September staff received bespoke training through the Queering University programme on “Building a Trans-inclusive University.”

New processes and procedures have been put in place; e.g. around communication of disability support to module leaders in our School and the wider University. A School-level Equity and Inclusion Committee has been established, for student- and staff-facing work. SCFS has also recently been granted an Athena SWAN Bronze Award and will be implementing a five-year action plan on a range of equity issues.

We will improve our communication of University-wide initiatives; e.g. [Report and Support](#).

In the longer term, these survey findings and future actions will continue to be, discussed in staff meetings, SSLCs and the new Equity and Inclusion Committee. We were pleased to learn that the majority of respondents value the School’s approach to equity and inclusion issues, and we will continue working with students to devise practices to improve the University experience for all.

Thanks for your time and contributions.

If anyone would like to discuss these issues further, please contact the School’s Equity and Inclusion Officer: [Dr Nick Bernards](#).