

Study Environment Survey at the University of Southern Denmark (SDU) 2015

In March SDU conducted its regular survey of the study environment for the fifth time. The aim of the survey is to provide a snapshot of how students assess their study environment so that SDU can create the best possible framework for its students' wellbeing. We look at the physical, aesthetic and virtual conditions and at the psychological and social framework. Of the 22,407 full-time students, 46.5% submitted their response to the electronic questionnaire. A report analysing the students' response has now been completed, and in the following you will be able to read a summary of that report. The report itself is only published in Danish, but if you have queries about the survey or the report you can write to smu2015@sdu.dk

The overall picture

Students have assessed SDU's general study environment using a scale of 0 to 10 (from very negative to very positive). This year's survey shows the highest score yet achieved – an average of 6.9 for 2015, which includes 80% positive assessments (assessments over 5). Students have also been asked to state which initiatives SDU should prioritise in order to ensure the best possible study environment. The three top priorities, which received most comment were: 1. reading areas, group rooms, and quiet, 2. lay-out and indoor climate and 3. surroundings and aesthetics. In the survey, we asked fulltime students whether they saw themselves as being in fulltime study, which 80% of them did. The students acknowledged that they spent on average 27.6 hours a week on their studies, which lies significantly below the definition of a fulltime study, which is 42 hours per week. There are, however, considerable variations between individual faculties.

Academic and social communities

The survey indicates that a highly significant factor for the students' wellbeing and their experience of their entire course of study is that they feel that they form part of an academic and social community, and it emphasises that being part of an academic and social community at university is an important precondition for a well-functioning life as a student. Within this area, what is rated lowest is the opportunity for contact with other students at SDU. Nevertheless, 81% of students say that they know a fellow student, whom they could turn to outside class in order to discuss an assignment. As regards study groups, the survey shows that 48% of students have set up a study group themselves, while 14% are in a study group set up by the course. There are 27% who prefer not to be part of a study group. The most interesting aspect, however, is that there are 9% who are not in a study group but wish to be. In relation to the 2013 survey, satisfaction with the choice of academic and social events has improved a little, but the opportunities for contact with other students is rated significantly more positively this time. Furthermore, there are 11% more students in study groups than in 2013. There is no advance in those feeling themselves to be part of an academic community and a small reduction in those feeling themselves part of a social community.

Wellbeing

Students at SDU have a sense of security and wellbeing. The greatest difference that can be demonstrated as regards the wellbeing of students at SDU lies in whether they were accepted on their course with a high or a low grade average. Those students living in the university city rate their wellbeing higher than those who commute. Of the respondents 11% state that they agree that they are lonely, but there is also a large group of 20% who state that they are 'neutral'. This group may – perhaps only at times – feel lonely. The assessment of their overall study environment given by those that felt lonely was rated 30% less positive than the group that did not regard itself as lonely. Of those that feel lonely, there were 26% fewer who were members of a study group, so – as was the case in 2013 – we can see some correlation between the lack of a study group and loneliness. Of the respondents, 20% confirm that they experience strong symptoms of stress on a daily basis and sometimes in examination periods, 35% say that they experience such symptoms in examination

periods and 41% experience no symptoms of stress. Taken as a whole, this means that 56% of respondents have experienced strong symptoms of stress on a daily basis and during examinations. There are 14% of respondents who acknowledge that they are considering dropping their course, and the aspects that distinguish them most from those who are not considering dropping out are that they give a lower assessment of their wellbeing, their academic and social communities and of information and communication at the university. Other reasons named for leaving their course are the course itself, the teaching, geographical situation, fellow-students and administration and planning. Taken as a whole, the improvement in questions relating to wellbeing is not convincing. What we have are smaller groups who are not happy in their study and who may require a little extra effort to reach. There are, however, 5% fewer lonely students and 11% more students in study groups than in 2013.

Information and communication

In the area of information and communication, there are significant variations in responses to questions. At the campus level, Sønderborg is generally best placed, while at the faculty level it is the Faculty of Health Sciences. If students need guidance during their course, 75% agree that they can get it. However, the assessment of SDU.dk is among the lowest in the survey (45% on the positive scale). Generally, the questions in this area are assessed more positively than in 2013. In particular, information about relevant social activities and the library's web information have been given significantly better assessments. The remainder show a slight improvement. Another point where information about relevant social activities is interesting is in the development of 'Don't know' answers. In 2013 there were 23% who answered 'Don't know' while in 2015 there were only 6%. This indicates that a larger number of students have taken a stand, probably because the information reaches them more effectively.

IT conditions

Average assessments here are all above the mean though with a single exception. In Sciences, Health Science and Technology there are about 68% of positive responses as regards digital examinations. This suggests that there are different challenges at the three faculties in respect of digital examinations, as the free text fields, for example, indicate difficulties in drawing illustrations and writing formulae. Blackboard is given the poorest assessment and receives considerable comment in the free text fields. At the same time, this is also an area that has not undergone improvement in relation to the survey in 2013. Generally, considerable improvement can be seen in IT conditions. Very significant progress can be seen as regards opportunities for printing and copying – progress of no less than 28% on the positive scale. IT support and digital examination also make pleasing progress with about 12% more positive responses this time. The remainder either shows slight improvement or have scarcely developed since last time.

Physical conditions

At the SDU level, physical conditions receive the most varied assessments. The library is rated very highly with 88% positive assessments. Generally students on the Slagelse campus are slightly different from those at the other campuses in having lower assessments, while students at Sønderborg are most satisfied with their campus.. Overall 86% of respondents rate classrooms in which they receive teaching as being well-suited to the particular form of teaching. In addition, the Friday bar, the canteen and the corridor areas are rated highly. The computer rooms are rated lowest at the SDU level with only 50% positive assessments. However there are 27% who state that they do not use the computer room. The overall tendency since last time is positive. In the physical environment, however, it is also evident that there are certain campus issues that need to be addressed.

Aesthetic conditions

Four questions were posed regarding aesthetic conditions, and they are assessed very similarly at the SDU level, namely about 50% on the positive scale. This, however, covers the widest internal variations at SDU. At the campus level, Sønderborg dominates, followed by Kolding. The outdoor areas

received very different assessment from one campus to the other. The Slagelse campus marks itself out clearly by having very low assessments, where only 19% agree that outdoor areas are pleasant to be in. But Esbjerg campus is also on the low side, and assessments of the Odense and Kolding campuses are just over 50% positive. In the free text fields several students mention that there is unused potential in SDU's outdoor areas. Aesthetic conditions appear to have considerable significance for students' assessment of their general study environment and wellbeing, especially areas for studying and facilities for breaks and social interaction. In all areas improvements can be seen, but outdoor areas in particular have improved their ratings with 33% more positive assessments since 2013.

Safety

All responses to questions about safety are above the mean over 50% being positive. Safety is assessed as being very significant for wellbeing but not to the same extent for the study environment. Good progress can be seen since 2013 in the question as to the degree to which students feel able to act appropriately in a dangerous situation in the laboratory or workshop. Safety in relation to exercises has also improved, while the introduction is assessed as being at the same level.

Work on getting local initiatives going will now begin, and at the SDU level a number of top priorities across the board will be selected.