

# Your Students' Union

University of Birmingham

**guild** *of* **students**

## **Student Voice Report 2017**

*The current Birmingham Student Experience and  
Recommendations for Improvement*

**September 2017**

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*Please see Appendix A for Student Voice Report updates 2010 - 2016*

## Executive Summary

The University of Birmingham Guild of Students (the Guild) plays a vital role in ensuring that improvements to the quality of learning and teaching at the University of Birmingham (the University) are informed by students' views. The annual Student Voice Report is a key document in this process, highlighting what students and researchers have fed back to the Guild each academic year and making recommendations aimed at addressing the issues raised. Improving the student experience is at the heart of the Students' Union and its purpose, and the Student Voice Report is a key product of the aspiration to continually improve the academic experience for students at University of Birmingham.

Following the completion of the Student Written Submission (SVR) in 2009 for the Quality Assurance Agency's (QAA) Institutional HE Audit, the Guild was keen to ensure that information regarding the academic experience of students at the University was captured on an annual basis. This is now the seventh formal written report produced by the Guild, and it aims to reflect the student experience through the collection and analysis of feedback from students at University of Birmingham for the academic year 2016/17. By collating this information into a single report, we are able to establish clear recommendations for enhancements to the student academic experience which can be reached through a joint partnership with students and the University. The Student Voice Report also aims to track progress made on the recommendations of previous reports, and the outcomes and recommendations following the QAA 2015 assessment.

The SVR 2017 will this year have a slightly different structure to the reports of previous years. The SVR 2017 will be divided into two main sections: 'Issues relating to the academic experience' (academic issues) and 'Issues relating to the student experience' (enabler issues). This new structure will emphasize the importance of addressing not only traditionally academic issues but also place a clear priority on the enablers which allow students to fully access and participate in their educational experience. The Guild believes the two aspects are fundamentally and intrinsically linked, and therefore both should be of equal priority to address. Finally there is a third section addressing operational issues with University of Birmingham Code of Practice documents.

The SVR 2015 and 2016 focused on a number of high-level, strategic issues aimed at producing a series of recommendations to the University focussing on the biggest issues that were facing students at that point in time. Due to the nature of these recommendations, some of these have been further considered in SVR 2017, in order to continue to monitor the progress and set further objectives to achieve the long-term goals set. This year the SVR again focusses on the BME attainment gap to ensure the University remains vigilant and attentive in this area, with a focus on becoming sector leaders with regards to outreach and support. Additionally issues around study space and the PGR offer at Birmingham are investigated. Assessment and Feedback is once again a key theme of the 2017 report, as it has been annually. The report also reflects on a number of operational aspects and enablers to accessing education fully. These include recommending a new approach to forming University Code of Practice documents, PG mental health support, ensuring students on a leave of absence are able to access support and guidance and recommendations regarding digital enhancements to the Birmingham education experience.

## Introduction

The Student Voice Report 2017 is a summary of the most significant learning and teaching issues currently facing University of Birmingham students. The report draws upon qualitative and quantitative data from the 2015/16 and 2016/17 academic periods to create a picture of the academic experience that students and researchers receive at the University. The report recognises achievements and progress made by the University, as well as making recommendations for areas in which the student experience could be improved.

The report develops the work of the SVR 2016 which made a series of recommendations to the University including:

- That the University continue to work towards understanding the current picture at Birmingham, utilising staff and student perceptions and experiences to identify key challenges and opportunities for development. It is recommended that the staff – student working group be further developed, with a clear remit embedded to review current institutional strategies, policies and practices that seek to address student success and set out key recommendations and actions for implementation. It is also recommended that the work the University undertakes with regards to the Race Equality Charter shall have full involvement from the Guild of Students.
- That the University continue to monitor compliance with the 15 day feedback deadline and ensure student views are core to this process, through involvement with the Guild of Students and Student Representation System. The University should also ensure feedback policy and processes are clearly communicated to all students to ensure full understanding and enable students to establish expectations. The University should reemphasize across all Colleges that the reduction in time for feedback should have no bearing on the quality of feedback provided, and as such staff should not be advising students to seek out further detail after feedback has been provided – quality should be a standard requirement.
- The University should ensure there is full and complete understanding at the point where students sign to confirm they understand the rules around plagiarism and what constitutes breaches. The Guild would like to see the introduction of plagiarism information sessions delivered across all Colleges within the institution, with the University also investigating the feasibility of conducting a number of these sessions in other languages to facilitate a conversation around this issue rather than a document to sign. Best practice on this can be found in the School of History where a plagiarism module (Canvas quiz) is compulsory.
- That the University investigates, and if appropriate implements, a Primary and Secondary Personal Tutor system for Joint Honours students. The primary tutor, in the students main discipline, would have all the duties associated with a Personal Tutor such as welfare and programme conduct. The secondary tutor, from the students other discipline, would be a key contact to advice and support student's queries relating to that discipline.
- That the University investigates where opportunities and resources, for example field trips, are available to Single Honours students in a discipline but not available to Joint Honours students taking up the same discipline. This investigation should consider feedback from students.
- Encompassing the new Timetabling System, the Academic Timetabling Team should monitor Joint Honours timetables to identify potential clashes between disciplines. When identified the team should liaise with relevant Programme teams to quickly resolve the issue and communicate the outcome to students.
- That the University encourage regular contact between programme leads/teams from each discipline within a Joint Honours programme. This ideally would form part of these disciplines governance structure to ensure continuity.
- In addition, to the recommendations to be considered by the University, it is recommended that the Guild of Students continue to work with departments to ensure there is representation of Joint Honours students within the Student Representation System.

- That the University evaluate the current support provisions available across each College for part-time PGRs, with particular note given to College of Arts and Law and College of Social Sciences as the colleges with the highest proportion of part-time PGRs. The University should review the existing mechanisms in place to support part-time PGRs to complete their research programmes, implement enhancements and share best practice to ensure part-time PGRs can access the same opportunities as those available to full-time PGRs and ensure they feel supported in submitting their research and successfully completing their programmes.
- That the University work to ensure adequate informal learning spaces and group learning spaces are created as part of the new redevelopments on the main Edgbaston campus and, once open, are made available to students for flexible use. The University should also ensure that previous student feedback regarding Wi-Fi is used to guide future decisions on this aspect of facilities within newly developed spaces.

## Scope and methodology

This report focuses on the academic experience of students and researchers at the University of Birmingham. It has been compiled by the Guild's Student Voice Team, the Education Officer and the Postgraduate Officer, and is supported by a wide range of quantitative and qualitative research aimed at understanding the student experience.

Data used in this report comes from three main areas; national surveys, research conducted by the Guild and through indirect feedback. Data used for SVR 2017 has been primarily collected from the following sources:

- Birmingham Student Survey (BSS), 2016 & 2017.
- International Student Barometer (ISB), 2016.
- National Student Survey (NSS), 2016 & 2017.
- Student-Staff Committee (SSC) annual reports, 2016-17.
- Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), 2017.
- Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), 2017.
- University Education Committee (UEC) papers, 2016-17.
- University Quality Assurance Committee (UQAC) papers, 2016-17.
- QAA HER Key Findings Report 2016, 2016/17.
- QAA Student Written Submission 2016
- University of Birmingham Higher Education Review: Action Plan 2016
- Student Voice 'Speak Week' activity 2016
- Guild of Students' Student Rep Surveys, 2016 & 2017.
- Student Rep Forums, 2016-17.
- HESA data, 2015-16.

The SVR 2017 will this year have a slightly different structure to the reports in previous years. SVR 2017 will be divided into two main sections; Issues relating to the academic experience (academic issues) and; Issues relating to the student experience (enabler issues). This new structure will emphasize the importance of addressing not only traditionally academic issues but also place a clear priority on the enablers which allow students to fully access and participate in their educational experience. The Guild believes the two aspects are fundamentally and intrinsically linked, and therefore both should be of equal priority to address by the University. We also hope to see the welcoming of student feedback and decision-making within operational aspects of the institution, such as within Code of Practice documents.

Section 1	Partnership between the Guild of Students and University of Birmingham
Section 2	<i>Issues relating to the academic experience (Academic Issues)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>2.1 An end to the Black and Minority Ethnic Attainment Gap (continued)</li><li>2.2 An approach to Assessment and Feedback which is accessible, transparent and clear</li><li>2.3 Embed and support an enhanced Postgraduate Researcher (PGR) offer at Birmingham</li><li>2.4 Review the provision for study space on the Edgbaston campus</li></ul>
Section 3	<i>Issues relating to the student experience (Enabler Issues)</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>3.1 Review of the support provision for PG Mental Health</li><li>3.2 Ensuring digital enhancements in education are used appropriately</li></ul>
Section 4	<i>Issues relating to the operational practices at the University of Birmingham</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>4.1 Separate Students and Staff from all Code of Practices institution-wide</li><li>4.2 Support for students on a leave of absence</li></ul>
Section 5	Summarises the recommendations of the report
Section 6	References
Appendix A	Provides an update on any action taken in response to the recommendations of the 2016 (and earlier) Student Voice Reports

## 1. Partnership between the Guild of Students and University of Birmingham

In order to display an accurate and rounded view of the student experience during their time at University of Birmingham, SVR 2017 will again this year include information and updates on the partnership work which takes place between the two organisations to better the academic experience of students and researchers.

The Guild has a positive and professional relationship with the University, and a strong sense of partnership working has developed across a range of services in recent years. Our work is increasingly collaborative, which benefits our students by providing services and support they can access and engage with. This can be challenging at times, as the operational and political priorities of both parties do not always align. Despite this there is a clear willingness on both sides to maintain open lines of communication and to support positive initiatives for the benefit of our students.

Students and researchers are well represented on University committees, and are supported to participate fully through Guild briefings and direct links to University staff. Elected Officers, Student Representatives and members of the Guild management team meet regularly with colleagues in the University and work closely together on key operational issues. The University always is welcoming of Guild contributions to policy development, and is supportive of the principles of effective student representation. As we describe below, major collaborative projects have been extremely successfully in 2016/17 and have helped students to make real and positive changes to their University experience.

### Student Representation System

The Student Representation System (SRS) is a long-running partnership between the University and the Guild. In 2014/15, the Guild proposed wide scale amendments and developments to the then 'Student Rep Scheme' across the University, in an effort to drive forward the scheme's effectiveness and fundamentally improve our levels of engagement. The major change to the system was the adoption of a tiered framework of representation that would sit above the current structures within each School and College, guaranteeing a minimum level of representation at every level of decision making across the University.

Now at the end of its second full year, the new SRS is widely regarded by both organisations as successful, with increased levels of engagement, participation and retention seen throughout the system. This year saw a record number of Student Reps take up the role with numbers increasing by 70% compared to 2013/14 with over 1,000 Reps active. Increased Student Rep Volunteers means increased student representation on Staff Student Committees and within other forums and working groups, which is extremely positive and has led to student involvement in most decision making process across the organisation.

<b>Volunteer Opportunity</b>	<b>No. of Volunteers 2013/14</b>	<b>No. of Volunteers 2014/15</b>	<b>No. of Volunteers 2015/16</b>	<b>No. of Volunteers 2016/17</b>
<b>Student Reps</b>	687	806	823	1,169
<b>College Reps</b>	N/A	8	12	10
<b>Fitness to Practice Reps</b>	2	5	6	3
<b>Misconduct Reps</b>	14	12	8	13
<b>Senate Reps</b>	N/A	5	5	4

Alongside volunteer numbers, the Guild also monitored impact and success through four Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) embedded in the organisation's 2014-17 Strategic Plan. Progress on these KPIs was periodically reported back to the University via the Student Representation System Advisory Board. Significant advances have been seen in these KPIs over the past three years, with 2016/17 achieving all targets set.

<b>Guild of Students KPI (<a href="#">Strategic Plan 2014-17</a>)</b>	<b>2014/15</b>	<b>2015/16</b>	<b>2016/17</b>
Implement a new student representation scheme	Implemented in 2014/15		
100 changes implemented each year as a result of the SRS	121	265	377
80% satisfaction with the SRS		58%	78%
80% satisfaction with services, which students can identify as partnerships between the University and the Guild			79%

2016/17 has also seen the Guild and the University continue the work on creating a 'community' for Student Reps, encouraging networking and the sharing of best practice through a number of projects, events and system enhancements. These have included hosting for a second year, the Regional Rep Conference in partnership with Aston University, University College Birmingham, Newman College and Birmingham City University. Great advancements have been made this year in the technology we offer our Student Reps to help support their gathering feedback from peers; this has primarily been done via the Guild's website. The full Student Rep Online Hub offering, including the 'Find My Rep' functionality, will be available to all students from 2017/18. Finally, the Speak Week initiative led by Student Reps this year saw an incredible 1,579 comments collected from the student body about their experience at Birmingham, helping us better our practices and further informing SVR 2017. Future plans for the system include a full scale review and brand of the Panel Volunteer Scheme, a focus on Distance Learners to ensure they can fully engage in SRS and a revised training plan for all Student Reps, splitting PGs and UGs and focussing on School-level training to ensure information is relevant and local.

### **International Buddy Scheme – Global Buddies**

In 2015/16 the Guild presented a proposal to the University for an International Student Buddying Scheme pilot to be run in 2016/17 with the aim of improving the University's international welcome and addressing key issues flagged in the International Student Barometer survey satisfaction scores. The hope was to increase the overall satisfaction of international students studying at the University. The proposal was approved and successfully implemented throughout 2016/17. This scheme provides a peer to peer service of informal support and guidance on how to engage in wider community activities, enabling international students to meet people from other countries and fully integrate into University life.

The Scheme engaged far more international students and volunteers than expected, the original target to engage 100 international students was exceeded with over 500 students engaged to date. The original target to recruit 30 volunteer 'Global Buddies' was also vastly exceeded, having to date trained 83 who are now able to provide one-to-one guidance and support at events and trips, which became a key part of the international student experience. This year 34 events have been held, engaging over 1,900 international students. A regular bi-weekly event Global Café is held at Guild Costa throughout the year and requires an overflow room to accommodate the sheer volume of students. As a result of the success this year Global Buddies has now been integrated into the Guild's compact process so it is now a permanent feature of Guild Advice, welcoming international students upon arrival and providing support for years to come.



## **Student Mentor Scheme**

The Student Mentor Scheme is delivered by the Guild in partnership with Hospitality and Accommodation Services (HAS). The purpose of the Student Mentor Scheme is to provide advice and guidance to students living in University residences. The Scheme helps with a wide range of issues including shared living and accommodation-related issues, academic matters, financial matters and the general wellbeing of students whilst studying and living at the University. The Scheme also employs a Welcome Team of 200 students who help to move new students into their accommodation. This academic year, they helped to move approximately 6,000 students in, across 8 sites and over 3 days.

## **Not On Ambassadors**

In 2016/17 the University awarded the Guild funding to recruit 4 Not On Student Ambassadors. Supported by Guild Advice, the Ambassadors were tasked with rolling out a one hour workshop to raise awareness and look at consent in relation to sexual harassment, showing students how to look after themselves and their friends on a night out. The workshops were designed to build on the success of the Not On Campaign set up by the Guild Officers in previous years, which aimed to promote an environment in which sexual harassment of any kind is deemed to be wholly unacceptable and to enable students to have the knowledge, ability and confidence to report and take action against all forms of sexual harassment utilising the University's online reporting tool 'You report, we support'.

This year the Guild was targeted to deliver the one hour workshop to 250 students (which was exceeded) and a 15 minute awareness raising presentation to 750 students which was achieved through Sports and Groups conference. This project also now features in the Guild's compact process so will continue to be delivered as part of Guild Advice. In 2017/18 the Ambassadors intend to roll out the workshops wider and support the University's HEFCE project which responds to sexual violence, sexual harassment and hate crime at a strategic level.

## 2. Issues relating to the academic experience (Academic Issues)

This section will address those issues which are traditionally seen as academic, including BME attainment gap, assessment and feedback, the PGR experience and study space. This new structure for SVR 2017 will emphasize the importance of addressing not only traditionally academic issues but also place a clear priority on the enablers which allow students to fully access and participate in their educational experience.

### 2.1 An end to the Black and Minority Ethnic Attainment Gap (continued)

In SVR 2015 the Guild took a strategic approach to the key areas it chose to present to the University. One of these areas was to work towards ending the black and minority ethnic attainment gap which is seen nationally across most HE Institutions including, at that time, the University of Birmingham<sup>1</sup>. The Guild continues to acknowledge that this is a complex issue and that it does not stand independently of wider inequalities in society. However we do continue to believe that the HE sector has a significant role to play in promoting equality of opportunity and success, and that Birmingham has potential to take a leading role in this. For this reason, the Guild will be presenting this topic again as a key recommendation for 2017, in order to continue the work already undertaken by the University and the Guild in 2015/16 and 2016/17.

Whilst great work has been undertaken by the University in recent years with the attainment gap narrowing, the University continues to see inequality in achievement amongst its students. In a recent analysis of the national picture conducted by WONKHE & HESA<sup>2</sup> it is clear that the attainment gap at Birmingham continues to be equal to or within the top 20 institutions which saw the highest levels of inequality in 2015/16. The disparity between black and Asian students achieving a first class degree in comparison to white students is at a staggering level. While University outcomes sees little difference between black and Asian students awarded upper second class degrees compared to white students, it appears that this is at the cost of a wide attainment gap at a first honours level.

National Attainment Gap HESA Data 2015/16<sup>3</sup> (University of Birmingham):

Provider name	Difference White/Black 1sts	Difference White/Black 2:1	Difference White/Asian 1st	Difference White/Asian 2:1
The University of Birmingham	<b>-21.00%</b>	1.40%	<b>-17.40%</b>	5.60%

Provider name	Black First class honours	Asian First class honours	White First class honours
The University of Birmingham	13.00%	16.60%	34.00%

Whilst acknowledging the difficulties in defining these demographics and the sensitivity around self-definitions, when looking at 2017 NSS data there are again some differences in black and Asian student satisfaction. When comparing black and Asian student responses to the sector wide average responses there is little variance, with Birmingham's black and Asian students either being as satisfied or more satisfied than the sector. The only significantly lower score is seen in black students' response to the section on 'Learning community', where the sector average is 77.33% but Birmingham's black students scored 70.33% (-7% difference)<sup>4</sup>. This difference is an interesting indicator and the theme of feeling part

<sup>1</sup> The ethnicity attainment gap, Jane Tope, UEC paper 14.10.03

<sup>2</sup> <http://wonkhe.com/blogs/analysis-universities-shame-black-attainment-gap/>

<sup>3</sup> [https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1k0rbaIMT\\_D8cN7VYSXI7P-211IQsJ-oos-Skx1NKqA/edit](https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1k0rbaIMT_D8cN7VYSXI7P-211IQsJ-oos-Skx1NKqA/edit)

<sup>4</sup> National Student Survey 2017, Ethnicity (four-way split) data

of a community being discussed further within this report. Overall black and Asian students rated their overall satisfaction as higher than that seen for the sector; Asian students had a +5.47% difference and black students had a +3.48% difference. This is a positive indicator that Birmingham is working towards a sector-leading approach to the attainment gap and satisfaction amongst the BAME student community.

Unfortunately the positive differences seen above diminish when satisfaction scores of black and Asian students at Birmingham are compared with their white student counterparts. Of the main 35 NSS question results (inclusive of overall section averages), Asian students more or less scored half of these above the white student average and half below. However, this results changes when the response from black students are compared, with 57% of black student responses resulting in lower scores than white students:

	No. of responses above white student scores	No. of responses below white student scores	% above white student scores	% below white student scores
Asian students	17	18	49%	51%
Black students	15	20	43%	57%

Some key themes emerge when the data is broken down further. Below is a table<sup>5</sup> containing the difference in satisfaction scores for the largest negative variances between Asian students and black students, when compared with white students. Of particular concern is -8% difference in black students' satisfaction with advice, and the -7.4% (Asian students) and -6.8% (black students) difference in satisfaction with staff making the subject interesting. This variance is reminiscent of NSS 2016 results. In SVR 2016 it was noted that the most drastic disparity between white students and BME students appeared to be around the course being interesting and teaching being engaging and exciting. For the same question 'Staff have made the subject interesting' we saw a vast 12% difference in satisfaction between black students (77%) and white students (89%)<sup>6</sup>. This difference only diminished slightly when other minority ethnic students' feedback was added, (-10% difference in satisfaction). Whilst it should be acknowledged that the difference has narrowed somewhat, these NSS scores from 2016 and now 2017 raise questions around course interest and engagement, signifying potentially a continued issue with the diversity of the curriculum at Birmingham.

	Staff are good at explaining things.	Staff have made the subject interesting.	My course has challenged me to achieve my best work.	Marking and assessment has been fair.	Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices on my course.	Overall satisfaction
Asian % Agree	89.4	80.1	83.9	69.9	74.0	89.07
Black % Agree	89.3	80.7	80	71.3	67.8	87.07
White % Agree	93.9	87.5	84.4	74.8	75.8	89.1
<b>Asian/White % Agree difference</b>	<b>-4.45</b>	<b>-7.4</b>	<b>-0.4</b>	<b>-4.9</b>	<b>-1.8</b>	<b>-0.03</b>
<b>Black/White % Agree difference</b>	<b>-4.52</b>	<b>-6.8</b>	<b>-4.4</b>	<b>-3.4</b>	<b>-8</b>	<b>-2.03</b>

<sup>5</sup> National Student Survey 2017, Ethnicity (four-way split) data

<sup>6</sup> National Student Survey 2016, Ethnicity (four-way split) data

It is clear that black students experience lower satisfaction than Asian and white students at Birmingham. When their additional lower scored NSS 2017 responses are examined (please see table below), a further theme of lack of community and working with others emerges, as well as a feeling of a lack of opportunity to provide feedback<sup>7</sup>. Lack of community or inclusivity was also cited within feedback gathered during the Student Rep End of Year Survey 2017, with one student stating 'I would focus on making it an inclusive environment for ethnic minority students'.

	I feel part of a community of staff and students.	I have had the right opportunities to work with other students as part of my course.	I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course.
Asian % Agree	71.31	87.17	89.39
Black % Agree	59.33	82.31	82.55
White % Agree	70.92	86.83	87.49
<b>Asian/White % Agree difference</b>	0.39	0.34	1.9
<b>Black/White % Agree difference</b>	<b>-11.59</b>	<b>-4.52</b>	<b>-4.94</b>

The Guild continues to acknowledge that the University has taken steps towards this recommendation following the SVR 2015 and 2016, especially with regards to embarking on the Race Equality Charter<sup>8</sup>. We remain optimistic that by undertaking this charter work the University will further progress their work on tackling the BME attainment gap, and BME student satisfaction and engagement with their education. However, in light of TEF and the move towards the grading of institutions, and following the 2015/16 HESA data released, it is clear that far more work is required on this issue and the University should not lose sight of addressing the black and minority ethnic attainment gap across this entire institution.

#### **Recommendations:**

**That the University continue to work towards understanding the current picture at Birmingham, utilising staff and student perceptions and experiences to identify key challenges and opportunities for development. Particularly, diversity of the institution-wide curriculum should be reviewed and enhanced.**

**It is recommended that a functioning staff – student working group be developed, with a clear remit embedded to review current institutional strategies, policies and practices that seek to address student success and set out key recommendations and actions for implementation.**

**It is also recommended that the work the University undertakes with regards to the Race Equality Charter shall have full involvement from the Guild of Students and student feedback throughout**

<sup>7</sup> National Student Survey 2017, Ethnicity (four-way split) data

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/equality-charters/race-equality-charter/>

## 2.2. An approach to Assessment and Feedback which is accessible, transparent and clear

Assessment & feedback is the biggest source of student dissatisfaction within the UK Higher Education sector and is a common theme running across all institutions nationwide. It has long been an issue at Birmingham and something which has been of particular focus for a number of years within the SVR. It is positive to see that the University recently acknowledged that there is a need to address challenges relating to assessment and feedback on UG and PGT programmes. The Guild are excited to see the impact that the new Assessment and Feedback Code of Practice<sup>9</sup> (CoP) will have when introduced in the new academic year 2017-18. However it is still clear that, as has been the pattern of previous years, assessment and feedback remains a key source of dissatisfaction amongst Birmingham students and as such must remain a key SVR priority recommendation for 2017.

When examining the NSS 2017 results for this section, there is a strong indication that the issue within this theme may now be related to clarity and transparency, rather than timeliness and detail (please see table below). Feedback from students over the past year has led the Guild to believe that part of this issue remains in the perception that decisions are made 'behind closed doors' and are not fully explained to the student body. This was evident in the decision to move from the 20 day to 15 day feedback deadline, where students fed back anecdotally to the Guild about not understanding the rationale behind this change. One Student Rep also made a similar comment during feedback gathered in the Student Rep End of Year Survey 2017, making the following recommendation:

*'Focussing on solving the perception that university decision making is inefficient, and making the rationale behind decisions clear to the student body'*

National Student Survey 2017; % Agree Scores for Assessment and Feedback

	Assessment and feedback	The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance.	Marking and assessment has been fair (Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair – Q prior to NSS 2017)	Feedback on my work has been timely (Feedback on my work has been prompt – Q prior to NSS 2017)	I have received helpful comments on my work (I have received detailed comments on my work – Q prior to NSS 2017)
<b>2017</b>	<b>71.6</b> (+1.6)	<b>70.7</b> (-5.3)	<b>73.2</b> (-3.8)	<b>74.3</b> (+3.3)	<b>68.2</b> (+3.2)
2016	70	76	77	71	65
2015	70	76	79	66	66
2014	69	74	76	68	65
2013	68	75	76	67	65
2012	66	73	77	64	61
2011	62	69	72	59	56
2010	63	69	75	60	57
2009	63	69	74	59	58
2008	62	68	74	58	59

When NSS 2017 free text comments are analysed it is again clear that the main issues raised by students are around clarity and transparency of marking and feedback, as well as concerns around the level of detail and consistency. 1,456 individual comments made reference to 'feedback' and a further 526 referenced 'assessment'. Timeliness of feedback, whilst mentioned by some students, appears to no longer be a major concern across the board which is positive to see. There is a very strong steer from students that they would like to understand the marking system in more detail to then understand why certain marks are given. The theme of transparency and understanding also crosses over into

<sup>9</sup> UEC.17.03.04 Revised UEB paper on Assessment and Feedback

assessments, where students would like to better understand how assessments are going to be used within their programmes. Student cite 'fairer' marking on a number of occasions, which again may be linked to perceptions of individuals following their frustration in not understanding how the marking system works more generally, rather than having specific examples of where they know marking has been unfair. Finally, a large number of students also made recommendations for having more one-to-one opportunities to receive feedback and ask questions, as well as identifying that online feedback, for example via Canvas, would be easier and quicker to use.

Additional feedback on this issue was gathered as part of the Student Rep End of Year Survey 2017 and shows the same areas of concern raised as those within NSS:

<b>What further recommendation would you make to improve your academic experience?</b>
<i>'I feel like coursework that we spend hours and hours on isn't always marked with time and care. Especially in 1st and 2nd year where I know that PhD's who get paid a lot to mark coursework as TA's don't take it seriously.'</i>
<i>'Feedback on assessment'</i>
<i>'Focussing on solving the perception that university decision making is inefficient, and making the rationale behind decisions clear to the student body.'</i>
<i>'Better feedback on coursework, not just ticks and crosses. Not helpful.'</i>

When discussing issues around assessment and feedback we have traditionally seen dissatisfaction amongst both UG and PGT students. However, the results of PTES 2017 indicate that the issues around assessment and feedback may have begun to be addressed for PGT students, with all responses for the section of 'Assessment and Feedback' receiving either higher or equal scores to those seen in the previous year PTES and the NSS 2017 scores (*please see table below*). All scores within this PTES section were also significantly higher than Russell Group comparator institutions. It therefore may be appropriate to prioritise assessment and feedback for UG students in the first instance.

*Postgraduate Taught Student Experience Survey Results 2017:*

<b>PTES Assessment and Feedback</b>	<b>2017</b>	<b>2016</b>	<b>2015</b>	<b>2014</b>
The criteria used in marking have been made clear in advance	78%	74%	76%	74%
Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair	76%	75%	75%	73%
Feedback on my work has been prompt	72%	70%	70%	66%
Feedback on my work (written or oral) has been useful	76%	74%	75%	75%

Finally, an area the Guild are particularly interested to see developed is the need for alternative forms of assessment for international students and those with disabilities. Difficulties posed by the lack of alternative assessment have often presented in Student Voice Report issues, and subsequent recommendations, and if successfully addressed should ease other areas of dissatisfaction such as welfare support and plagiarism<sup>10</sup>. Students have fed back that online assessment submission and online feedback may address part of this issue, with further investigation and resources required to address the issue in its entirety.

The Guild are pleased to see that there are examples of good practice across the institution referenced by both staff and students, such as LCAHM's 'Making Feedback Count' week and Law's use of audio-visual feedback on formative work. However, the Guild agrees with the University that a more consistent approach is needed to support those areas where students tell us they do not experience satisfactory feedback and assessment.

<sup>10</sup> SVR 2016 Recommendation: Support for International Students around Plagiarism

## **Recommendations:**

**The University should ensure that assessments are submitted and feedback is provided online (unless for a valid reason) to ensure consistency and accessibility.**

**To enhance the support available for students on assessment and feedback, to support them in understanding the range and methodology of feedback which may be in use. The University should consult with the Guild and students to ensure full understanding of what this support should look like, including consultation and involvement in creating the e-portfolio on Canvas. Ensure consideration has been given to students with disabilities and international students when compiling this support and implementing it.**

**The University should be transparent and timely in communicating with students on decisions made regarding assessment and feedback. The University and Guild should work together on a communications plan to ensure relevant, accurate and complete information is shared across the student body.**

## 2.3 Embed and support an enhanced Postgraduate Researcher (PGR) offer at Birmingham

For the past two years, SVR has made recommendations regarding the Postgraduate Researcher (PGR) experience at Birmingham. It is clear once again from the Postgraduate Researcher Experience Survey (PRES) 2017 that this issue remains prevalent and as such shall feature once again in SVR 2017. There have also been a number of concerns raised through formal University committees in 2016-17 regarding the experience and continuation rates amongst the part-time PGR cohort. PGRs play a key role in the Birmingham student experience and should be fully supported to conduct both their research projects and staff roles. This year's recommendation will therefore focus both on the community aspect of a PGR experience, as well as issues surrounding the experience of part-time PGRs.

The PRES 2017 does highlight a significant area of concern around building a robust Research Culture at Birmingham and supporting a community-feel amongst this group. Of the 31 statements within the survey<sup>11</sup> which are comparable with the Russell Group, the University performs worse than their comparator institutions for 25 statements (81%), of which 19 scores are statistically significantly lower. The University this year performed worst on 'Resources' and 'Research Culture'. As well as having significantly lower scores than the Russell Group for 'Research Culture', this is also an area in which 2017 scores are low and have decreased since 2015.

*Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2017 results:*

PRES Section	University of Birmingham	Russell Group	Sector
Supervision	86%	85%	86%
Resources	79%	83%	81%
Research Culture	63%	68%	66%
Progression	75%	78%	79%
Responsibilities	76%	79%	79%
Research Skills	85%	86%	86%
Professional Development	76%	79%	79%
Teaching	59%	61%	60%
Overall	81%	82%	82%

\* Cells highlighted show that the University score is significantly lower than RG/Sector scores.

*Postgraduate Research Experience Survey results 2013, 2015 and 2017:*

PRES Section	2013	2015	2017
Supervision	86%	88%	86%
Resources	77%	77%	79%
Research Culture	65%	68%	63%
Progression	78%	78%	75%
Responsibilities	76%	80%	76%
Research Skills	85%	87%	85%
Professional Development	76%	79%	76%
Teaching		60%	59%
Overall		83%	81%

When looking at this section in more detail, the lowest score is given for 'I have opportunities to become involved in the wider research community, beyond my department' at 57% agree. Also low scoring was the statement 'the research ambience in my department or faculty stimulates my work' at 61% agree. These two statements support the view that PGRs don't feel supported as their own community of researchers. The theme of support is further explored in the survey where PGRs have fed back that they

<sup>11</sup> Postgraduate Researcher Experience Survey 2017



feel under-supported when teaching. Just under half of the survey respondents said they have taught or demonstrated at Birmingham during their research programme. However, of those who have had the experience of teaching, only 59% agreed that they had been given appropriate support and guidance for their teaching. It is also interesting to note that the response rate for the PRES in 2017 was substantially higher than that seen in previous years, further validating this feedback (response rates: 43% in 2017, 28% in 2015, 29% in 2013, 19% in 2011 and 15% in 2009).

*Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2017; Research Culture section results*

<b>Research Culture % agree</b>	<b>UoB 2017</b>	<b>UoB 2015</b>	<b>UoB 2013</b>	<b>RG 2017</b>
My department provides a good seminar programme	<b>71%</b>	75%	74%	76%
I have frequent opportunities to discuss my research with other	<b>62%</b>	69%	64%	68%
The research ambience in my department or faculty stimulates	<b>61%</b>	66%	61%	66%
I have opportunities to become involved in the wider research community, beyond my department	<b>57%</b>	62%	59%	63%

The Guild has also spoken at length to PGRs this year through the Student Representation System and through additional activities such as Speak Week. During the Speak Week initiative run in December 2016, PGRs were asked about the support they had received during their time at Birmingham. Whilst the response rate was low for PGRs, almost all respondents did cite that other than through their supervisions, they received very little support. Respondents were more likely to relate support back to their family and friends rather than the University. PGRs also fed back about their University experience and enhancements they would like to see implemented across the institution via the Student Rep End of Year Survey 2017. These recommendations consisted of the following:

- *'Funding for postgrads for work placements or other opportunities. Not widely communicated if there are any, and most appear to focus on undergrads.'*
- *'There is no preliminary talk or training before becoming a PhD student. The experience is very new and very challenging but there is no preparation at all.'*
- *'Quality of teaching and knowledge transfer to PGR students is very variable and seems to lack any oversight at institute and college level.'*
- *'The university is particularly unresponsive to change when it comes to input from PGRs - the starting point I think has to come from different attitudes towards challenging feedback. As it is, those raising issues often feel that they are the problem, and the excuse that things were worse x years ago is one that's heard very often. This, sadly, has largely been my experience when raising issues over funding, wellbeing, mental health, and teaching in meetings with staff.'*
- *'More student training opportunities.'*
- *'Developing a stronger sense of community between students and their School/ College. Especially PhDs can feel very isolated in their Research, thus concentrating efforts to develop a stronger sense of belongingness between Staff-PGRs, encouraging PGRs to lead School Research Groups, developing mentoring programmes, more informal meet-ups between Staff-PGRS across Schools (e.g. Staff-PGR speed dating) could be very useful.'*

Aside from the bigger issue of the PGR institution-wide offer, there is also a concerning pattern of non-continuation amongst the part-time PGR cohort. The PGR Annual Review conducted in 2016/17 highlighted that submission and continuation rates for part time PGRs remains lower than full time, especially in College of Social Sciences and College of Arts and Law, where there are large populations of part time researchers. While the maximum potential completion rates for full time PGRs have been increasing over time, with the potential to exceed 85% in recent years, part time PGRs continue to have far lower potential completion rates (around 55% - 60%). When this issue was discussed at Graduate School Management Board (GSMB) it was identified that the high number of part time PGRs who leave means figures remain low for part time PGRs within these rates. It is therefore important to recognise the additional barriers part time researchers may be facing which prevents them from completing their programmes.

The PRES 2017 supports this disparity between full time and part time PGRs, showing a clear difference in satisfaction with the Research Culture offer amongst part-timers compared to their full-time

counterparts. Of particular note is the 21% difference in satisfaction for the statement 'I have frequent opportunities to discuss my research with other research students'.

Postgraduate Researcher Experience Survey 2017:

Research culture - % agree	Full or Part Time	
	Full-time	Part-time
My department provides a good seminar programme	72%	69%
I have frequent opportunities to discuss my research with other research students	65%	44%
The research ambience in my department or faculty stimulates my work	61%	58%
I have opportunities to become involved in the wider research community, beyond my department	57%	53%

Further to this, when the PRES open comments for the section on 'Research Culture' are investigated, interestingly the most common issue raised touched on the experience of distance learners or part time PGRs with 25% of all the comments received mentioning this type of experience. Anecdotally we also see that the part-time mode of study goes hand-in-hand with distance learning students, which could lead to an intensified feeling of isolation and a lack of a community. One example comment from the PRES 2017 also shows that other responsibilities such as a job can put further barriers in the way of feeling part of the PGR community at Birmingham; "As a part-time student in full-time work I cannot attend most of the research events that take place during the day."

Conversely, it is interesting to see that of those part-time PGRs who do complete their research degree programme, they appear to be as satisfied or more satisfied with their overall experience than full-time PGRs, as seen below.

Postgraduate Researcher Experience Survey 2017:

Overall Experience - % agree		
	Full-time	Part-time
Overall, I am satisfied with the experience of my research degree programme	80%	82%
I am confident that I will complete my research degree programme within my institution's expected timescale	82%	83%

It is clear that from both the quantitative and qualitative feedback gathered in 2017, PGRs require an enhanced PGR offer at the University, encompassing various aspects of support (including PGTA training and support, and enhanced support for part time PGRs), community building and an enhanced sense of belonging as a valued researcher at Birmingham.

#### Recommendations:

**The University should prioritise looking at their PGR offer, addressing the issue of research ambience and developing opportunities to mix beyond the School and College. Opportunities should not only be made available but widely communicated with PGRs being actively encouraged by the institution to participate in the wide research community.**

The issue of non-continuation rates in part-time PGRs should be investigated further, with Guild involvement. An enhanced support provision should be embedded across the institution to try to alleviate some of the barriers faced by part-time and distance learners.

That PGTA training and support is centrally managed and monitored through the new Graduate School structures to ensure consistency throughout the schools and colleges. The Guild also has initial plans to investigate the feasibility of implementing PGTA Student Reps within the SRS, to further support the views and feedback from this group. We would recommend the University support the Guild in this endeavour by ensuring PGTA Reps have a voice at appropriate committees and forums.

## 2.4 Review the provision for study space on the Edgbaston campus

2016/17 saw the second year of the new democratic decision-making platform "Your Ideas", replacing the previous Guild Council model. This new platform allows any individual student to submit an idea for an all-student vote online. If an idea successfully passes, it creates a mandate for the Officer Team to then work on implementing this idea. During the course of the last academic year a number of students submitted ideas around study space on the main Edgbaston campus, with 7 individual ideas submitted during the January 2017 cycle alone. Given the majority of the remaining ideas in 2016/17 were heavily related to operational matters, the Guild feels that this issue has a clear and strong steer from the student body to form a SVR recommendation for 2017. The content of the "Your Ideas" have been grouped below to form clear, distinct issues:

### The New Edgbaston Library

Students fed back that whilst the new library development was widely welcomed, it was felt that the use of the space internally was not appropriate. Sofas and group seating areas were cited as taking up valuable space which could otherwise be used for individual computer study spaces, which are in high demand. Difficulty in finding places to study individually was stated across a number of the ideas submitted, with one "Your Idea" confirming that students would have to adapt their lifestyle patterns in order to secure a study space (e.g. get up extremely early in the morning, skip lunch to keep a space, etc.). What was concerning was that one student spoke about having to make a decision between attending a lecture or obtaining a study space, as they found that by going to lectures and then trying to find a study space afterwards was too difficult. This approach is not conducive to a good learning environment and is clearly making the study body change their priorities in order to access a fundamental aspect of their education; space to study. Alongside these student submitted ideas, 247 comments in the National Student Survey 2017 made reference to the library of which 190 of these were negative. The vast majority of these comments supported the above student views, also citing a lack of study space as the key issue. Additionally, 10 negative comments about the newly developed Edgbaston library were also recorded through the Speak Week initiative, run in December 2016, with all of them making reference to a lack of space.

### Silent Study Spaces

Two "Your Ideas" in 2016/17 made reference to issues relating to silent study spaces: the lack of these spaces and the lack of clear signage to these spaces. It was stated that not enough silent study space has been dedicated in the main Edgbaston library. However, the main concern arose from a lack of clear signage of where is and isn't a silent study space, with one "Your Ideas" providing the following example: *'Often when working in the new, open plan library to encourage 'collaborative learning', you are regularly asked to be quiet by both library staff and other students, even though it is not a silent study area. It is difficult to learn 'collaboratively', when I am unable to discuss my work with another student in the library. Therefore, I propose either making specific sections of the library silent study areas, other than having the small silent study rooms that can only accommodate around 10 people on comfy chairs with no desks or computers. It needs to be published on each floor whether the areas are either silent study or non-silent study, as it is also irritating for those that wish to work in silent, to have to listen to other people learning in a collaborative manner.'*

### Unawareness of study spaces across campus/Availability of other spaces

The majority of the "Your Ideas" submitted made reference to 'struggling to find a space to revise', with one "Your Idea" asking whether any other study spaces at the University could be opened or are already open. This demonstrates a lack of awareness of any additional sites and spaces on campus which students can use to study in. One "Your Idea" stated that students tend to prefer to leave their homes to study, opting for a more formal, educational setting. If this is common across the student body this means a large number of students would come onto campus seeking study space as their preference and would probably try to find this space in the library resulting in the earlier feedback of a lack of space. Another "Your Idea" submitted this year posed the question of opening up Infusion during the day time to be a study space for Vale residents. They stated *'It sits completely empty all day while the library is completely full, and it would be really useful to be able to study closer to the accommodation, as I'm sure many others also find it difficult to work in the same room in which they relax. Currently, the radio is played too loud in Infusion to be able to work in there during the day.'*

## **Recommendations:**

**A review of the type of study spaces within the Edgbaston library should be conducted, taking forward student comments about a severe lack of individual computer seating. Whilst the Guild appreciates that infrastructure can be difficult to change, the sheer number of comments we have received on this topic cannot be ignored.**

**Clearer signage is required in study space areas informing students of the type of space they are in (e.g. silent areas), particularly the Edgbaston library.**

**The University should look to create a resource that informs students about all available study spaces on the Edgbaston campus. The list should be thorough, accurate and widely distributed. Where possible new spaces should be made available for 'study space' areas, especially during peak times such as exam periods.**

### 3. Issues relating to the student experience (Enabler Issues)

*This new structure for SVR 2017 will emphasize the importance of addressing not only traditionally academic issues as discussed in the previous section, but also place a clear priority on the enablers which allow students to fully access and participate in their educational experience. This section will address those enabler issues which have been fed back to the Guild as barriers to access, including mental health support provision and digital enhancements.*

#### 3.1 Review of the support provision for PG Mental Health

Widely considered as a growing epidemic within the educational system, the mental health issues faced by students - and in particular postgraduate and PhD students - have significantly increased over recent years. Mental health issues amongst postgraduate students particularly have been labelled as a crisis for UK HE institutions by the media<sup>12</sup>, medical professionals and academics. A recent study conducted by international researchers in Belgium has found that one in two PhD students experience psychological distress during their programme, with a further one in three at risk of experiencing a psychiatric disorder, particularly depression<sup>13</sup>. The same study also found that the prevalence of mental health problems is higher in PhD students than in the general population, employed population and other higher education students. It's widely acknowledged that the main contributing factors to this increased risk of mental health deterioration are increased workloads, intensified work, pace of work and isolation. Another aspect commonly cited amongst students, including Birmingham PGs is the challenging supervisory experience and relationship. Finally, the likelihood of PGs and PhD students of having other responsibilities in their personal life may also have an additional impact on their mental health when undertaking their study<sup>14</sup>. We believe this picture of PG mental health nationally and internationally is representative of PG mental health at Birmingham.

The Postgraduate Researcher Experience Survey 2017 supports the view that Birmingham PGRs are experiencing increased pressures on their mental health. When looking at the free text comments provided within this survey, 14% of these given made reference to the negative impact of research on mental health. When comments regarding wellbeing were broken down further, a total of 260 comments cited mental health specifically.

*Postgraduate Researcher Experience Survey (PRES) 2017: Proportion of PRES respondents making qualitative comments:*

<b>% of respondents commenting</b>	<b>Issue raised</b>
<b>14%</b>	Wellbeing: negative impact of research on mental health
<b>9%</b>	Resources: Library services unsatisfactory – journal subscriptions and inter-library loans
<b>8%</b>	Working environment: unsatisfactory amenity
<b>6%</b>	Resources: unsatisfactory working space – availability and quality of space
<b>6%</b>	Working environment: IT – inadequate facilities and support
<b>5%</b>	Progress and Assessment: Inadequate induction
<b>5%</b>	Progress and Assessment – inadequate information about procedures and standards
<b>5%</b>	Working environment – inadequate academic support

<sup>12</sup>12 <https://www.theguardian.com/education/series/mental-health-a-university-crisis>

<sup>13</sup>13 Levecque K. et al May 2017, Work organization and mental health problems in PhD students

<sup>14</sup>14 <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/universities-urged-tackle-phd-mental-health-crisis>

Category	Count of comments about negative impacts on wellbeing
Mental health	260
Other	46
Physical health	45
Isolation	24
Positive comment	7
Language	1

These comments make reference to mental health factors such as stress, anxiety, and depression, with examples of comments provided below:

- *“Pressure to finish in time, uncertainty to career prospect lead to depression.”*
- *“I have never really suffered with mental health issues before, but since starting my PhD, I have been diagnosed with anxiety and depression, and am currently undergoing treatment.”*
- *“Long hours are exhausting and the stress and work load can be mentally draining. It is also very lonely as every research project is unique.”*

Fewer than 5% of respondents mentioned other topics, but issues raised by small numbers of PGRs also included negative effects on their physical health and suffering from isolation.

The PRES 2017 asked respondents whether undertaking research had affected their mental or physical wellbeing, of which 33% agreed that it had. The responses then began to vary when looking at College and programme type. 43% of PGR respondents within College of Social Sciences agreed undertaking research had a negative impact on their wellbeing, compared with 28% in College of Arts and Law. An interesting pattern was also seen in programme type responses where more PGRs agreed with this statement as time within their programme increased (17% 1st year, 32% 2nd years and 43% 3rd year or more). As expected PhD students had the highest agree level with this statement at 34%, which when compared with 25%-agreement by Masters by Research students, is quite significant.

These responses must be given the most serious of consideration. It is clear that mental health does deteriorate as PGRs progress through their programme and is particularly prevalent in PhD students. Whilst we acknowledge mental health issues can affect any person at any time, this also raises concerns about those students with existing disabilities, whether physical or other, and how these students may feel unsupported during their time at Birmingham opening them up to increased risk of mental health deterioration. When looking at PRES 2017 results, those PGRs with a disability were almost always likely to score substantially lower than those with no disability, as seen below. The starkest of differences are also seen in what should be considered the most basic of provisions such as suitable working space, appropriate induction and training. However the biggest difference in score is seen for the statement *‘My institution values and responds to feedback from research degree students’* (-21%). These scores are very concerning and should be an area the University dedicates research and support to in 2017/18.

Data from the Postgraduate Researcher Experience Survey 2017 can be found in the table below.

Supervisor - % agree	Disability		Difference
	Yes	No	
My supervisor/s have the skills and subject knowledge to support my research	95%	92%	3%
I have regular contact with my supervisor/s, appropriate for my needs	82%	89%	-7%
My supervisor/s provide feedback that helps me direct my research activities	86%	88%	-2%
My supervisor/s help me to identify my training and development needs as a researcher	75%	77%	-2%
<b>Resources - % agree</b>			
I have a suitable working space	66%	79%	-13%
There is adequate provision of computing resources and facilities	70%	77%	-7%
There is adequate provision of library facilities (including physical and online resources)	77%	86%	-9%
I have access to the specialist resources necessary for my research	68%	78%	-11%
<b>Research Culture - % agree</b>			
My department provides a good seminar programme	64%	72%	-8%
I have frequent opportunities to discuss my research with other research students	56%	63%	-7%
The research ambience in my department or faculty stimulates my work	54%	62%	-8%
I have opportunities to become involved in the wider research community, beyond my department	53%	57%	-4%
<b>Progress and Assessment - % agree</b>			
I received an appropriate induction to my research degree programme	58%	71%	-13%
I understand the requirements and deadlines for formal monitoring of my progress	74%	84%	-10%
I understand the required standard for my thesis	69%	77%	-8%
The final assessment procedures for my degree are clear to me	61%	71%	-10%
<b>Responsibilities - % agree</b>			
My institution values and responds to feedback from research degree students	40%	61%	-21%
I understand my responsibilities as a research degree student	84%	88%	-4%
I am aware of my supervisors' responsibilities towards me as a research degree student	84%	86%	-2%
Other than my supervisor/s, I know who to approach if I am concerned about any aspect of my degree programme	63%	73%	-10%
<b>Research Skills - % agree</b>			
My skills in applying appropriate research methodologies, tools and techniques have developed during my programme	86%	89%	-4%
My skills in critically analysing and evaluating findings and results have developed during my programme	88%	87%	1%
My confidence to be creative or innovative has developed during my programme	75%	79%	-4%
My understanding of 'research integrity' (e.g. rigour, ethics, transparency, attributing the contribution of others) has developed during my programme	82%	85%	-3%
<b>Professional Development - % agree</b>			
My ability to manage projects has developed during my programme	77%	81%	-4%
My ability to communicate information effectively to diverse audiences has developed during my programme	74%	78%	-3%
I have developed contacts or professional networks during my programme	61%	69%	-8%
I have increasingly managed my own professional development during my programme	75%	80%	-4%
<b>Opportunities</b>			
Agreeing a personal training or development plan	49%	54%	-5%
Receiving training to develop my research skills	62%	74%	-12%
Receiving training to develop my transferable skills	30%	39%	-9%
Receiving advice on career options	29%	28%	1%
Taking part in a placement or internship	12%	14%	-2%
Attending an academic research conference	71%	69%	2%
Presenting a paper or poster at an academic research conference	57%	55%	2%
Submitting a paper for publication in an academic journal or book	32%	32%	0%
Communicating your research to a non-academic audience	39%	37%	2%
<b>Overall Experience - % agree</b>			
Overall, I am satisfied with the experience of my research degree programme	72%	81%	-10%
I am confident that I will complete my research degree programme within my institution's expected timescale	70%	83%	-13%



## **Recommendations:**

**As an immediate priority, the University should consider the use of segmented communications from Counselling and Wellbeing, and Welfare Tutors, to make it clear that services are open and accessible to PGRs.**

**Resource should also be given to exploring why disabled PGR students have a lower level of satisfaction and are therefore at increased risk of mental health issues. Whilst the Guild appreciates Colleges vary in their offers, we believe this must be led by the Senior Management Team in order to ensure the research is carried out to a consistent and appropriate standard.**

**The University should acknowledge the complex nature of this issue and commit to resourcing further work towards addressing mental health issues associated with undertaking a research programme. It is also suggested that as this issue appears to be a national one, there may be an opportunity to work in partnership with University of Nottingham.**

### 3.2 Ensuring digital enhancements in education are used appropriately

The use of technology to maximise the student learning experience is an exciting area for development within the Higher Education sector and is currently one in which much discussion is being had. The Higher Education Commission in January 2016 released a report on the current data landscape across English HE institutions and what the sector might look like in 5-10 years<sup>15</sup>. The Commission predicts that the future of higher education is going to be 'increasingly global, increasingly competitive and increasingly digital'<sup>16</sup> and in order for UK HEIs to compete they need to be proactive in adapting to this way of existing. It is positive to see that these conversations have been initiated by the University, with the current development on a new Digital Education Strategy. The Guild have seen students over the past three years move towards this way of thinking also, stating that technology should be used to enhance their educational experience.

This began a number of years ago with feedback from students about the Wi-Fi coverage across campus and in halls of residence. However, as technology has grown students are becoming more and more aware of how this technology can also enhance their experience at University and are beginning to call for such advances to be embedded within their curriculum, becoming not only operational requests but educational enablers.

In total 143 comments within the National Student Survey 2017 cited 'digital', 'online' or 'technology'. As expected, the majority of these comments focused on the use of or lack of use of Panopto as well as online feedback. However, some interesting and mixed comments were given regarding the current picture of use of technology within the curriculum at Birmingham:

- 'Online portals have a strange, old-fashioned feel compared to other university systems I have seen which opposes the modern way of working they induce.'
- 'Too few of my lectures have been recorded digitally — the department should move forward into the digital age. Canvas pages for courses are sometimes poor, an agreed standard would be a big improvement.'
- 'The online infrastructure, Canvas, is well structured, although could do with a search bar.'
- 'Lecturers do not use the technology available to them as it's intended to be used'
- 'The library, we need more books, there are not enough for us to borrow. They should supply more materials like online.'
- 'Staff unable to use technology in lectures delaying start.'
- 'Sometimes it isn't clear which section of the online portal certain resources are.'
- 'Poor online access to resources.'
- 'Use of Canvas, Panopto and other online courses in order to be able to recap specific material.'
- 'Online resources available to me are brilliant, I couldn't fault them.'
- 'This year in particular the course has made a great effort in creating the online student hub which has been extremely helpful.'
- 'I like the structure of learning and the online resources are very handy.'
- 'Since its launch in my first year, I am pleased Canvas and MyBham are being utilised to greater effect. The online availability of resources is beneficial.'
- 'Accessible online resources and easy to use.'
- 'The online eLearning course was a very useful tool.'

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<sup>15</sup> From Bricks to Clicks - The Potential of Data and Analytics in Higher Education

(<http://www.policyconnect.org.uk/hec/research/report-bricks-clicks-potential-data-and-analytics-higher-education>)

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.policyconnect.org.uk/hec/sites/site\\_hec/files/report/419/fieldreportdownload/frombrickstoclicks-hecreportforweb.pdf](http://www.policyconnect.org.uk/hec/sites/site_hec/files/report/419/fieldreportdownload/frombrickstoclicks-hecreportforweb.pdf)

The desire for creative, technologically-advanced ways of learning and teaching were also cited throughout numerous feedback comments gathered as part of the Student Rep End of Year Survey in June 2017. These have been compiled below under emerging themes:

Theme	Student Comment		
<b>Variety of learning tools / ways of learning / increased creativity</b>	'More varied ways of learning'	'I would improve the course content. I don't believe we gained anywhere near enough from the course that I have taken. I think my university experience has stifled creativity and an overall desire to learn. The whole degree seems like a means to an end, which it should not be. That is not what education is about.'	The approach to teaching - different types of teaching not just lectures'
<b>Online Resources</b>	'As a part time student the online available resources are great, further improvement in this would be great'	'Improve the resources available for students'	
<b>Panopto</b>	'Recording lectures by video, rather than just by sound.'	'Panopto recording for certain modules especially if it is a difficult concept or you're going through a complex problem which needs attention on, I think Panopto will be most useful for that, to look back on later.'	'Definitely the availability of Panopto. It would really aid people with learning difficulties ability (and everyone's) to be able to listen back to a lecture'
<b>Technological abilities of staff</b>	'Lecturers answering questions on canvas quicker'	'Lecturers technological abilities, especially learning how to use canvas properly so as to avoid the stress of misinformation around assignments.'	
<b>Technical skills taught to students</b>	'Providing students with key skills earlier on in the three years of their course (e.g. statistical analysis) so they can use these skills with more confidence later on.'		

Every time a student interacts with the University, be that visiting the library, logging into the student portal or submitting assessments online, they will leave behind a digital footprint. Learning analytics (the process of using this data) can be used to improve learning and teaching, and whilst the Guild believes this can build a great picture of the student journey and provide the institution with ideas for improvements, this approach must also be used carefully and with a great deal of respect and sensitivity.

The University are taking positive and proactive steps towards becoming sector leaders in this area, however from student feedback gathered it is clear the current use of technology in the curriculum is varied and at times uninspiring. The final recommendation in the SVR 2017 is therefore to look at how the University, in partnership with the Guild can look to embed this digital approach to education across

the institution. The Guild acknowledges this is again a longer-term recommendation and as such is likely to be reviewed in future reports.

**Recommendations:**

**The University should work with the Guild, and in partnership with students, to ensure the Digital Education Strategy is ambitious, sector-leading and technologically advanced for an institutions such as Birmingham. Fundamental infrastructure issues must be addressed in order to allow space for digital enhancement to the curriculum, such as Wi-Fi.**

## 4. Issues relating to the operational practices at the University of Birmingham

*This section will address those issues which arose in 2016/17 related to the operational practices at the University of Birmingham, and which we believe if resolved would remove some of the barriers to student support and access at the institution.*

### 4.1 Separate Students and Staff from all Code of Practices institution-wide

The University's current approach to Code of Practice (CoP) documents is to encompass both students and staff within one and the same document. The Guild of Students believes that students and staff have vastly different needs and as such a Code of Practice is not appropriate to cover both groups. An example of where this approach has hindered progress for students can be demonstrated through the recent work undertaken on the Code of Practice on Academic Appeals. Over the past 18 months the Guild and the University have embarked on conversations about amending this CoP to allow Guild Advice staff to act as a 'friend' to students attending an academic panel.

The Guild recommends this approach would vastly benefit students as Guild Advice staff directly support cases from start to finish and will be better equipped to act as a friend in these situations. This approach is also used across the majority of other institutions including (but not limited to) University of Warwick, Brunel University, Lancaster University and Aston University. However concerns raised by the University have hindered the progress of this amendment as this CoP also covers staff going through appeals. It is clear to the Guild that this approach of writing such documents is impeding enhancements to the student experience and as such is something we implore the University to look to fundamentally change in 2017/18.

#### **Recommendation:**

**That the University amends the Code of Practice on Academic Appeals to allow Guild Advice staff to act as a 'friend' to students attending an academic panel.**

**The University should look to completely review the approach taken to writing Code of Practice and Guidance documents, to ensure all CoP documents separate students and staff for the purpose of clarity and to allow enhancements to be made to the student provision, such as through the adoption of guidelines to support student parents and carers.**

### 4.2 Support for students on a leave of absence

Currently at the University of Birmingham, if a student takes a leave of absence they are not permitted to access University or Guild services during that period of leave as "there is no active student registration" during this period<sup>17</sup>. This includes counselling and wellbeing services, which are only accessible to "registered students".<sup>18</sup> In a large number of circumstances, students take a leave of absence for very personal and emotional reasons and as such these services would be greatly valued by the student during this time and as a step towards returning to their programme – as a result, Guild Advice and other Guild welfare services have supported students during periods where there are not normally registered. Guild Officers have regularly been approached by students over the past twelve months about this issue, however due to the sensitive nature of these circumstance, these comments have and will remain anonymous.

The Guild believes the Code of Practice on Leave of Absence Procedure should be amended to allow students on a leave of absence to access specific services, such as counselling and wellbeing services. Whilst it cannot be statistically proven, the SVR 2017 has also looked at issues around continuation rates in part time PGRs and mental health issues, and we believe that allowing access to support services during difficult periods of time would be of great benefit to the student body and the University.

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<sup>17</sup> Code of Practice on Leave of Absence Procedure, 2017-18

<sup>18</sup> <https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/student-services/counselling/index.aspx>

**Recommendations:**

**To amend Code of Practice on Leave of Absence Procedure to ensure that students undertaking a leave of absence are able to access University counselling, wellbeing and support services during this time, with a view to supporting their transition back into study.**

**To actively publicise support services to students on a leave of absence.**

## 5. Summary of Recommendations

The Guild of Students recommends:

- That the University continue to work towards understanding the current picture at Birmingham, utilising staff and student perceptions and experiences to identify key challenges and opportunities for development. Particularly, diversity of the institution-wide curriculum should be reviewed and enhanced.
- It is recommended that a functioning staff – student working group be developed, with a clear remit embedded to review current institutional strategies, policies and practices that seek to address student success and set out key recommendations and actions for implementation.
- It is also recommended that the work the University undertakes with regards to the Race Equality Charter shall have full involvement from the Guild of Students and student feedback throughout.
- The University should ensure that assessment feedback is always provided online (unless for a valid reason) to ensure consistency and accessibility.
- To enhance the support available for students on assessment and feedback, to support them in understanding the range and methodology of feedback which may be in use. The University should consult with the Guild and students to ensure full understanding of what this support should look like, including consultation and involvement in creating the e-portfolio on Canvas. Ensure consideration has been given to students with disabilities and international students when compiling this support and implementing it.
- The University should be transparent and timely in communicating with students on decisions made regarding assessment and feedback. The University and Guild should work together on a communications plan to ensure relevant, accurate and complete information is shared across the student body.
- The University should prioritise looking at their PGR offer, addressing the issue of research ambience and developing opportunities to mix beyond the School and College. Opportunities should not only be made available but widely communicated with PGRs being actively encouraged by the institution to participate in the wide research community.
- The issue of non-continuation rates in part-time PGRs should be investigated further, with Guild involvement. An enhanced support provision should be embedded across the institution to try to alleviate some of the barriers faced by part-time and distance learners.
- That PGTA training and support is centrally managed and monitored through the new Graduate School structures to ensure consistency throughout the schools and colleges. This Guild also has initial plans to investigate the feasibility of implementing PGTA Student Reps within the SRS, to further support the views and feedback from this group. We would recommend the University support the Guild in this endeavour by ensuring PGTA Reps have a voice at appropriate committees and forums.
- A review of the type of study spaces within the Edgbaston library should be conducted, taking forward student comments about a severe lack of individual computer seating. Whilst the Guild appreciates that infrastructure can be difficult to change, the sheer number of comments we have received on this topic cannot be ignored.
- Clearer signage is required in study space areas informing students of the type of space they are in (e.g. silent areas), particularly the Edgbaston library.
- The University should look to create a resource that informs students about all available study spaces on the Edgbaston campus. The list should be thorough, accurate and widely distributed.

Where possible new spaces should be made available for 'study space' areas, especially during peak times such as exam periods.

- The University should look to completely review the approach taken to writing Code of Practice and Guidance documents, to ensure all CoP documents separate students and staff for the purpose of clarity and to allow enhancements to be made to the student provision.
- As an immediate priority, the University should consider the use of segmented communications from Counselling and Wellbeing, and Welfare Tutors, to make it clear that services are open and accessible to PGRs.
- Resource should also be given to exploring why disabled PGR students have a lower level of satisfaction and are therefore at increased risk of mental health issues. Whilst the Guild appreciates Colleges vary in their offers, we believe this must be led by the Senior Management Team in order to ensure the research is carried out to a consistent and appropriate standard.
- The University should acknowledge the complex nature of this issue (PGR Mental Health) and commit to resourcing further work towards addressing mental health issues associated with undertaking a research programme. It is also suggested that as this issue appears to be a national one, there may be an opportunity to work in partnership with University of Nottingham.
- To actively publicise support services to students on a leave of absence.
- To amend Code of Practice on Leave of Absence Procedure to ensure that students undertaking a leave of absence are able to access University counselling, wellbeing and support services during this time, with a view to supporting their transition back into study.
- The University should work with the Guild and in partnership with students, to ensure the Digital Education Strategy is ambitious, sector-leading and technologically advanced for an institution such as Birmingham. Fundamental infrastructure issues must be addressed in order to allow space for digital enhancement to the curriculum, such as Wi-Fi.



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