

# **Your** **Students' Union**

University of Birmingham  
**guild of students**

## **Student Voice Report 2019**

*The Current Birmingham Student Experience and  
Recommendations for Improvement*

**August 2019**

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## Executive Summary

The University of Birmingham Guild of Students (the Guild) plays a vital role in ensuring improvements to the quality of learning and teaching at the University of Birmingham (the University) are informed by the student voice. The annual Student Voice Report (SVR) is a key document in this process, highlighting key areas of student and researcher feedback over the 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 our aspiration to continually improve the academic experience for students at Birmingham.

Initially arising from the completion of the 2009 Student Written Submission for the Quality Assurance Agency's Institutional HE Audit, this is now the ninth report produced by the Guild. By collating feedback from the 2018/19 academic year, we are able to establish clear recommendations for enhancements that can be achieved through partnership between students and the University.

Following inclusion in the previous Student Voice Reports 2015-18, there are number of strategic issues that remain featured in the SVR as they are beyond the scope of completion in a single academic year. As such, the SVR 2019 builds on previous recommendations, again focussing on the Black and Minority Ethnic Attainment Gap, Assessment and Feedback and the Student Voice. Additional themes around Academic Integrity and Access and Participation have arisen from student feedback and emerging areas of partnership project work. A theme on Placements and Study Abroad is maintained, to support completion of recommendations from the SVR 2018.

## Scope and Methodology

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

Data has been primarily collected from the following national and local sources:

- Birmingham Student Survey (BSS), 2017 & 2018
- Higher Education Academy UK Engagement Survey (UKES) 2017 & 2018
- National Student Survey (NSS), 2017 - 2019
- Student Staff Committee (SSC) Annual Reports, 2017-19
- Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), 2017 & 2019
- Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES), 2017 - 2019
- University Committee papers, 2017-19
- Birmingham Assessment Change Initiative Report
- Guild of Students' Student Rep Survey, 2016, 2017 & 2019
- Guild of Students' Postgraduate Engagement Review, 2017-18

## **Partnerships between the Guild and the University**

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, rightly 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 2018/19 and have helped students to make real and positive changes to their University experience.

### **Student Representation System**

The Student Representation System is a long-running partnership between the University and the Guild, involving the participation of over 1,000 Student Reps and staff across the Guild, Registry and Schools. Over the last three academic years, a record number of Student Reps have taken up the role with numbers increasing by 70% compared to 2013/14. 86% of Student Reps are satisfied with their participation in the Scheme, and Reps make over 250 changes to programmes, Schools and Colleges each year.

This year, the Guild and the University have collaborated to review the Student Representation System, making a number of recommendations that will ensure the student voice is strengthened on campus, and is fit for the future.

### **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**

Not On is a joint campaign launched by the University and the Guild to raise awareness about sexual harassment and consent. Led by 4 student Ambassadors, the Not On campaign delivered 1 hour workshops about consent and sexual harassment to over 250 students, along with multiple consent-themed outreach events and activities.

### **Community Wardens**

The Community Wardens Scheme is delivered by the Guild, in partnership with HAS, working to build a safer, cleaner and greener community for students and residents in Selly Oak and Bournbrook. The Scheme delivers community events such as Christmas on Campus, litter picks, safety information, the Selly Express and Junkbusters collections, raising funds for the British Heart Foundation. This year, the Scheme collected 1200 bags full of unwanted goods from students, with a value of £137,734.

### **Hall Reps**

The Halls Reps Scheme is delivered by the Guild, in partnership with HAS. The Halls Reps student staff deliver a tailored programme of events to engage students living within University accommodation, including Welcome events, large scale activities such as the Freshers Fling and targeted events for Postgraduate and International students.

## Issues relating to the academic experience

### 1. Black student satisfaction, attainment and experience

Addressing the Black and Minority Ethnic Attainment gap has been a key strategic theme within Student Voice Reports 2015-19. Though the Guild acknowledges that the attainment gap remains a complex issue that does not stand independently of wider inequalities in society, we believe that institutions can play a significant role in supporting Black attainment, experience and success. The Guild would also like to acknowledge central and local efforts from the University to address this issue thus far, from work to achieve the Race Equality Charter, the E&D Ambassador Scheme and local projects across Schools and Colleges.

Since the completion of SVR 2018, additional data has been collected at UoB as part of the Access and Participation Plan (APP) 2020/21 – 2024/25 and the Race Equality Charter (REC) survey. The National Student Survey (NSS) 2019 also highlights a continuing gap in satisfaction between Black and White students at the University of Birmingham.

#### **Attainment & Success**

Nationally, the attainment gap stands at 13.2%, with the largest attainment gap standing between White and Black students. This gap between Black and White students overall persists even if the data is cut in different ways – e.g. based subject group, term time residence, domicile country and domicile region. More than 2/3rds of institutions have an attainment gap above 10%.<sup>1</sup>

BAME students at the University of Birmingham are less likely than their White peers to attain good honours. At a more detailed level, the gap to White attainment ranges from 8.2% (students of other ethnicity) to 15.7% for Black students.<sup>2</sup> Though these gaps are smaller than the sector average, they remain statistically significant.

The Guild fully supports the University's APP target to eliminate or reduce the gap in degree outcomes for Black and Asian students to a non-significant level. We recognise the work that has been undertaken at a local School or College level through School Education Plans and other projects. However, as identified in the Undergraduate and Postgraduate Annual Review 2017/18, the Guild believes there is now an opportunity to move past further local analysis into "identifying concrete action designed to address the attainment gap itself", perhaps through the form of College Action Plans.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Universities UK & NUS, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Student Attainment at UK Universities: *#ClosingtheGap* (2019).

<sup>2</sup> University of Birmingham Access and Participation Plan, 2020/21 – 2024/25.

<sup>3</sup> Undergraduate and Postgraduate Annual Review 2017/18, SEN.19.06.06

## Satisfaction, Experience and Belonging

These disparities have also played out across National Student Survey satisfaction data in recent years, and NSS 2019 demonstrates consistently lower scores by Black and Asian students.<sup>4</sup> BAME students reported lower satisfaction than their White peers across all core areas apart from *Learning Resources*.<sup>5</sup> Not only is there a gap in satisfaction across all core areas, but NSS 2019 reports a gap of **more than 10% in overall satisfaction** between Black and White UoB finalists in 2018/2019.

It is also worth noting that Black students at the University of Birmingham have lower satisfaction scores than Black students across the sector. Table 1 below outlines key gaps in satisfaction, with 10%+ gaps in core areas such as *Assessment and Feedback*, *Academic Support* and *Teaching and Learning*. Of particular concern is a **20% gap in satisfaction on the following question: “I have received helpful comments on my work”**. It is worth considering that not only are 2019 Black UoB finalists considerably less satisfied than their White UoB peers and Black graduates across the country, satisfaction for this group has also declined across every core area (bar Learning Resources) for the last 3 years. **Despite efforts from the University, Black UoB students are considerably less satisfied now than they were in 2017**. In contrast, nationally satisfaction for this group has remained fairly stable:

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<sup>4</sup> National Student Survey 2019

<sup>5</sup> Average of 86.4% satisfaction across the 4 way ethnicity split, NSS 2019.



	The teaching on my course	2. Staff have made the subject interesting.	4. My course has challenged me to achieve my best work.	Learning opportunities	Assessment and feedback	8. The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance.	9. Marking and assessment has been fair.	11. I have received helpful comments on my work.	Academic support	I have received sufficient advice & guidance in relation to my course	Good advice was available when I needed to make choices	Organisation and management	Learning community	21. I feel part of a community of staff and students.	Student Voice	The students' union (association or guild) effectively represents students' academic interests.	Overall satisfaction
UoB Black Students	75.57	71.57	66.02	78.8	61.04	62.14	55.34	54.85	72.9	66.5	62.69	73.38	64.56	53.66	71.22	51.22	76.59
UoB Black/ White Student gap	-12.63	-14.54	-16.11	-4.39	-8.7	-5.22	-17.7	-12.28	-6.56	-11.0	10.37	-2.46	-11.06	-13.52	-0.79	-5.13	-10.61
UoB /Sector Black Student Gap	-12.08	-7.11	-16.46	-6.02	-11.74	-11.33	-11.81	-20.4	-5.46	-11.0	-10.5	-2.55	-10.75	-12.99	-2.89	-9.09	-5.6
UoB Black Student satisfaction – 2019 v 2017	-9.93	-9.1	-13.98	-5.2	-11.63	-5.86	-15.99	-16.48	-6.77	-15.4	-5.1	-5.29	-5.77	-5.67	-1.04	-7.4	-10.48
Sector Black Students - 2019 v 2017	3.01	-1.4	-1.67	-1.19	-0.65	-0.56	-1.31	-1.02	-0.57	-0.74	-0.76	-1.36	-2.02	-2.59	0.16	-1.72	-1.4

UKES data has consistently outlined that Black UK students demonstrate high engagement with staff beyond that of their White peers, yet learning outcomes and student satisfaction among these students remains lower.<sup>6</sup> This is also reflected in national PTES 2018 data<sup>7</sup>. It is of particular concern that a number of 2019 survey questions that deal with staff/student interactions (*I have received helpful comments on my work; Good advice was available to me; I feel part of a community of staff and students*) score particularly poorly amongst Black students. These gaps are even starker at Postgraduate Taught level than between White and Black Undergraduates, with substantial gaps of up to 24.5% on the following questions:

Core Area	Question	White	Black	Difference in Satisfaction
Teaching	I am happy with the support for my learning I receive from staff on my course	78.4%	65.6%	12.8%
Engagement	The workload on my course has been manageable	65.7%	56.7%	9%
Assessment	Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair	82.3%	61.8%	20.5%
Dissertation	I am happy with the support I received for planning my dissertation / major project	72.3%	66.1%	6.2%
Organisation	I was given appropriate guidance and support when I started my course	80.1%	55.6%	24.5%
Skills Development	As a result of the course I am more confident about independent learning	84.5%	76.4%	8.1%

Race Equality Charter comments also demonstrate that students believe tutors and lecturers lack competence in facilitating discussions around race:

*“Some (white) lecturers are visibly uncomfortable dealing with such topics and therefore try to end the discussion as quickly as possible”*

The Guild believes there is a clear need for staff undertaking roles such as the Personal Academic Tutor, Wellbeing Officer and Student Experience Officer to receive enhanced training around unconscious bias, race (including active conversations around race) and culturally competent support in partnership with the E&D Ambassador Scheme.<sup>8</sup>

It is worth noting that these lower scores extend outside of the academic experience at Birmingham, though there have been some improvements since 2018 – we acknowledge

<sup>6</sup> Neves, J. (2019). UK Engagement Survey, Advance HE.

<sup>7</sup> Leman, J. (2018). Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey. Advance HE.

<sup>8</sup> UKES data also highlights different engagement levels and satisfaction between Black students and those of a Mixed background. Further data is required to understand this trend in more depth.

that there is a considerable gap between White and Black student satisfaction with the Guild, which we will continue to work to address over the coming academic year. Black students are also less likely to be satisfied with extracurricular life at Birmingham:

	<b>Black</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>Difference Black / White</b>
<b>I have had plenty of opportunities to interact socially with other students</b>	69.39 (-1%)	86.69 <b>(+5%)</b>	73.54 (+3%)	<b>-17.3%</b>
<b>I am satisfied with the range of societies on offer</b>	74.23 (+2.5%)	91.74 <b>(+4.5%)</b>	82.42 <b>(+4%)</b>	<b>-17.5%</b>
<b>I am satisfied with the range of entertainment and social events on offer</b>	54.64 <b>(+4.5%)</b>	84.26 (+4%)	74.79 (+3.5%)	<b>- 29.62%</b>
<b>There is sufficient provision of welfare services to meet my needs</b>	56.7 (+2%)	56.69 <b>(-11%)</b>	67.05 (-1%)	<b>0%<sup>9</sup></b>
<b>My institution takes responsibility for my safety</b>	59.79 <b>(-6%)</b>	49.25 <b>(-21%)</b>	66.38 <b>(-8%)</b>	<b>+ 10%</b>

A lack of belonging both in the academic community and in extracurricular life was also flagged as an area of concern in the Race Equality Charter Student Survey Results.<sup>10</sup> 34% of Black / Black British, 23% of Chinese students and 16% of Mixed students reported experiencing racism on campus, across all aspects of university life – in interactions with tutors in lecturers, racial discrimination in sport activities and incidents of hate crime during social activities. There were also clear recommendations from students here about clear reporting structures, pathways for support and direct communications from the University & Guild around zero tolerance.

Clearly these differences in attainment and satisfaction go beyond lecture content and reading lists and reflect structural inequalities across Higher Education institutions. We acknowledge that many of these structural inequalities exist well before a student begins a course of study or research at Birmingham. However, the Guild believes that both the University and Guild have a continued and urgent mandate to support BAME students on campus and to ensure our community is supportive, inclusive and diverse.

<sup>9</sup> To note, these scores are now equal because of the dramatic decline in White satisfaction, not an increase in Black satisfaction.

<sup>10</sup> Pertek, S. (2019) Qualitative Analysis of Race Equality Charter Survey Comments.

## **Recommendations:**

- **The University and the Guild, with the input of the E&D Ambassador Scheme and relevant student groups, to partner on a central priority communications campaign focussing on zero tolerance to racism on campus.**
- **The University to embed the recommendations of the UUK / NUS report on Black attainment in practice during the 2019/20 academic year, and to develop, a central toolkit on BAME student engagement, experience and support in partnership with the Guild.**
- **The University to require all staff and students to undertake unconscious bias training, with enhanced training on dealing with conversations around race for all teaching and support staff.**
- **The Guild to work with relevant students to deliver a workshop on Black Student experience and belonging at the next Guild Student Experience Day.**

## 2. Assessment and Feedback

Assessment and Feedback has been a feature of the Student Voice Report for a number of years, and the Guild and University worked in partnership to develop a new Code of Practice on Assessment and Feedback, launched in 2017. In 2018/19, the Guild also collaborated with the Director of Student Experience to develop a Guide to Feedback<sup>11</sup> for students, and a new Assessment Cover sheet has been introduced with the aim of encouraging consistency in feedback across the University and to support active student engagement with feedback.<sup>12</sup>

There are also clear areas of good practice across the University, flagged regularly through Student Rep feedback and Annual SSC Reports. However, NSS 2019 demonstrates that Assessment and Feedback remains a "major weakness"<sup>13</sup>, with overall satisfaction for this section remaining stagnant at 68.24%. The University is ranked 120<sup>th</sup> in this area, 12<sup>th</sup> in the Russell Group and 12.39% below the top quartile. Though again, there are clearly some subject areas of excellent practice across the University, the Guild is particularly concerned by scores in Psychology (49%), Computer Science (59.2%), Business and Management (62%) and Politics (62.77%).<sup>14</sup> Additionally, *Feedback* featured as Birmingham's second lowest performing core block on PTES 2019.

More specifically, the University continues to perform poorly across feedback questions ranking 126<sup>th</sup> and 125<sup>th</sup> respectively for *The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance* and *I have received helpful comments on my work*. Specific areas of concern here also include Psychology (48%), Computer Science (54%), Pharmacy (54%) and Business (56%)<sup>15</sup>. Though initial steps to ensure feedback is useful and timely have been undertaken, with the introduction of the new assessment template, implementation has been inconsistent and there is further work to do to support students to understand and engage with their feedback.

In addition, clear monitoring of feedback exemptions and breaches across the Colleges has been undertaken through UQAC, allowing a clearer picture of missed feedback deadlines and student communications in this area. It remains the Guild's stance that, though exemptions and breaches will of course sometimes be necessary, it is imperative that adjusted timelines and reasoning are **clearly communicated to students before the initial 15 day turnaround period has elapsed wherever possible**. Anecdotal feedback from students suggests that poor communication of these extensions or breaches is often at the root of student dissatisfaction with feedback.

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<sup>11</sup> UEC.19.01.03 A&F Charter, Adam Goldstone

<sup>12</sup> UEC 19.06.03, Feedback on the Assessment and Feedback Templates, Kathy Armour.

<sup>13</sup> National Student Survey 2018, UEC

<sup>14</sup> NSS 2019, CAH1 Scores.

<sup>15</sup> NSS 2019, CAH1 Scores.

Previously highlighted issues around clarity, transparency, timeliness of feedback, and quality of feedback remain outlined in free text comments from students across the NSS and PTES:

*Feedback is extremely general and difficult to make use of and sessions designed to help make use of feedback are regularly cancelled. (NSS 2019)*

*Expectations of coursework have varied quite a lot between members of staff, e.g., expectations of APA, detail needed in a paragraph, their expectations of what they want you to produce. This has meant that we improve on feedback from our previous marker but then the coursework given has been marked low because the person marking the current work doesn't have the same views on work as the previous marker. (NSS 2019)*

*Whilst marking criteria is always available, it is not always useful. Assessment feedback is typically slow and, even then, is generic across myself & peers (PTES 2019)*

*New feedback forms not suitable for practical feedback. Comes across as vague and difficult to act upon. (NSS 2019)*

Additional feedback from Student Staff Committee Annual Reports also demonstrates that, though there appears to have been a general improvement in feedback timeliness over the academic year, there remain areas for improvement around personalised feedback and timeliness of assessment. This feedback was also echoed in student focus groups delivered instead of the Birmingham Student Survey this year.<sup>16</sup> It is clear, also, that the new feedback template has not been universally useful, particularly where the assignments are non-essay based or, anecdotally, where there were concerns (often from international PGT students) around unconscious bias and / or reticence to note "weaknesses" which may then impact on grades.<sup>17</sup>

PTES 2019 also highlights the need for a specific area of focus on Dissertation or Major Project feedback for PGT students. Though acknowledging the unhelpful timing of the survey when reflecting on dissertation support, there has been a 3.9% drop in satisfaction in response to *My supervisor provides helpful feedback on my progress*.

Assessment and Feedback therefore remains a pressing issue across the institution and, although there are some clear areas of strong performance, there are also areas of real concern and inconsistency.

### **Recommendations:**

- **The Guide to Assessment and Feedback to be disseminated across Schools and Colleges for inclusion in induction materials.**
- **The Guild work in partnership with the Director of Student Engagement to support the development of a Learning Agreement, that outlines student rights and expectations**

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<sup>16</sup>UEC.19.06a Student Focus Group Outcomes and UK Engagement Survey, Jo Luckett & Paul Ashby

<sup>17</sup>SSC Annual Reports, 2018/19.

around assessment, feedback and learning. At Postgraduate Taught level, this should include clear expectations for the Dissertation or Major Project.

- The University and Guild work in partnership to fully consult students on the implementation of the new Assessment cover sheet and to review impact by the end of 2019/20
- The University to ensure that specific activity and action around Assessment and Feedback is included in the Business, Psychology, POLSIS, Pharmacy and Computer Science School Education Plans.

### 3. Academic Integrity and Examinations

Across the University, 2017/18 saw a considerable reduction in the number of academic integrity cases related both to plagiarism and exam irregularities and Student Conduct, Complaints and Appeals (SCCA) have worked proactively with the Guild and Colleges to develop additional resources to raise awareness amongst students about these issues. Additionally, a new Academic Integrity module on PebblePad was introduced, though take up has been minimal to date.<sup>18</sup>

However, in 2017/18, 83 of the 121 plagiarism and examination irregularity cases referred to SCCA involved international students and there was a considerable spike in cases during the Business School January examination period. The Review of the International Student Experience noted that, though there were areas of best practice around assessment practices for international students, there was still a need for information to be provided in Plain English and to ensure that communications reached international students at the right time.<sup>19</sup>

The Guild notes that the Birmingham Assessment Change Initiative Report outlined that there are opportunities for concerns around essay mills and plagiarism to be “designed out” through effective assessment design. The Guild also notes the benefits of alternative and authentic assessment for the development of students’ transferable skills, for student engagement and for opportunities to design out attainment gaps (e.g. the international attainment gap), as outlined in the EAT Framework.<sup>20</sup>

Additionally, the Guild has received student feedback both through cases at Guild Advice and through survey comments, about inconsistencies in Extenuating Circumstances communications, processes and awards and concerns about the implementation and award of Reasonable Adjustment Plans. Student comments from NSS 2019 include:

*“The reasonable adjustment plan and extenuating circumstances support the college and provide is not the same standard as other colleges across the University. The way the college provides for those who need the support needs to be re-evaluated in order to make it equal and fair because at the moment, these students are disadvantaged” (NSS 2019)*

*“I have struggled with getting staff to acknowledge and provide the required resources related to my disability and RAP.” (NSS 2019)*

*“I was waiting over two months for support and a RAP to be put in place, despite having deadlines before this” (NSS 2019)*

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<sup>18</sup> SEN.19.06.08., Annual Report on Student Conduct, Complaints and Appeals.

<sup>19</sup> Review of the International Student Experience, UEB

<sup>20</sup> Evans, C. (2016), Enhancing Assessment Feedback Practice in Higher Education: The EAT Framework



The Guild has begun to audit the information provided on Canvas to students by Schools and Colleges regarding Extenuating Circumstances and we have already found large inconsistencies in the information provided. We believe this forthcoming year provides an opportunity for the University to develop clear communications and processes for both staff and students before the introduction of the New Academic Teaching Year.

**Recommendations:**

- **The Guild to audit Extenuating Circumstances information provided on School and College intranets, and to provide recommendations for standardisation.**
- **The Guild and University to work in partnership to review the Code of Practice on Extenuating Circumstances and additional Guidance for Staff and Students in this area**
- **The University to hold an Extenuating Circumstances Forum for Wellbeing Officers and relevant colleagues, to encourage consistency and sharing of best practice.**
- **The Guild and University to collaborate on standardised Plain English information (including a short animation and quiz) around Academic Integrity for dissemination via PebblePad, to ensure duplicate or out of date material is removed from the Intranet and to monitor uptake of the online academic integrity module**

#### 4. Supporting the Student Voice & Building a Community of Staff and Students

Over the last 12 months, the Guild has worked in partnership with the University to deliver a thorough review of the Student Representation System. Following consultation with over 400 stakeholders, including Student Reps, students, Student Experience Officers and academic colleagues, a number of recommendations were developed to strengthen the recruitment, support and training of the 1000+ Student Reps at Birmingham with the aim of improving the Student Voice on campus.<sup>21</sup>

Steps have also been undertaken to develop and strengthen existing relationships between the Guild and Student Experience Officers, with the Guild hosting a successful first Student Experience Day in May 2019. Additional work has also been undertaken by the University, with the participation of the Guild, to review impact of student surveys on the Student Voice and closing the feedback. The Guild welcomes the introduction of the UK Engagement Survey (UKES) in replacement of the Birmingham Student Survey and is keen to remain an active participant in the development of this project.

However, though the PTES has seen some increase in Student Voice and Engagement questions, both the NSS and the PRES have seen declines in satisfaction with opportunities to feedback, staff valuing student feedback and the steps taken by the institution to act on this feedback:

		NSS 2019	PTES 2018	PRES 2019 <sup>22</sup>
<b>I have had the right opportunities to feedback on my course</b>	2019	85.8	79.7	
	Difference to 2018	-2	-0.5	
	Difference to sector 2019	+1	-0.3	
<b>Staff value students' views and opinions about the course<sup>23</sup></b>	2019	73.1	81.8	55
	Difference to 2018	-4.5	+1.5	-3
	Difference to sector 2019	-2		-4
<b>It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted upon</b>	2018	58.4	67.2	
	Difference to 2017	-5.0	+4.7	
	Difference to sector 2018	-2		

<sup>21</sup> UEC 19.06.05b , Student Representation System Review, Adam Goldstone & Lucy Gill

<sup>22</sup> To note, PRES data is comparable to 2017, as the survey is conducted every two years.

<sup>23</sup> PRES question: *My institution values and responds to feedback from research degree students*

Aside from *Assessment and Feedback*, the *Student Voice* core bank of questions has the lowest satisfaction rate amongst finalists, with the University ranked 96<sup>th</sup> nationally, and *My institution values and responds to feedback* is the lowest performing core question on PRES, 5% below the Russell Group. There are also vast inconsistencies across courses in these areas, with NSS Department satisfaction scores ranging from 93% - 59% on the *Student Voice* core bank and 95% - 36% on Question 25 (*It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted upon*). College discrepancies are also seen across PRES, with CAL (who have a dedicated PGR Student Experience Officer) scoring 10% above LES (who have no Postgraduate SEO support).

The Guild hopes that consistent implementation of the Student Rep Review recommendations will support improvements in these scores (through improved representation and closing of the feedback loop). We also believe that course organisation which correlates strongly to overall satisfaction, has a key impact on student sentiment around the Student Voice and their School community. Survey data shows that this score has a disproportionate impact upon Joint Honours, Study Abroad and Distance Learner students – who may be particularly impacted by timetable changes, changes to personal tutors and confusion over module choices.

At the core of this issue is communication:

*Organisation is poor, with lectures time/place being changed last minute with very **poor communication** between organisers and students throughout the course. (PTES 2018)*

*Our student rep is great at raising concerns, but **we never see any communication to say that the issues have been addressed.** (BSS 2018)*

Anecdotally, feedback from Student Reps and Guild Officers also supports this – with students confused by a lack of central messaging on changes or bombarded by multiple messages from different levels of the University. We are particularly concerned that, with substantial changes to the academic year on the horizon, that a clear strategy is developed for communicating the NATY project to students over the coming academic year.

The Guild would also like to recognise that there are a number of areas of excellent practice in Student Voice and closing the feedback loop. We believe that sharing this best practice should form a key part of a second Student Experience Day to be hosted by the Guild. In addition, we also believe that good practice in this area often correlates to a strong Student Experience Officer presence, together with active partnership working with the Guild. There is an opportunity for the University to ensure consistency in the student experience across Schools and Colleges by reviewing and consistently implementing these valuable roles across the institution.

Work over the next year must also acknowledge and prioritise the differing needs of PGR students - It is vitally important that any work to review and develop the Student Charter and the Student Engagement Strategy consults with a range of student voices from across the institution and the Guild is keen to partner the University proactively in this work.

## **Recommendations:**

- **The Guild and the University to track the implementation of the Student Rep Review via SRSAB and generate a bank of best practice examples in this area by the end of 2019/20.**
- **The Guild and University to work in partnership to review the Student Charter and to develop the proposed Student Engagement Strategy.**
- **The Guild to host a Student Experience Day with a focus on closing the feedback loop and the Student Voice**
- **The University, consulting with the Guild, SEOs and students, to develop a consistent strategy for Student Experience Officer roles and priorities, which does not duplicate existing activity**
- **The University to develop a student communications strategy for the NATY project, including clear messaging pathways and student engagement activity.**

## 5. The Postgraduate Researcher Experience

### i. **Progression and Assessment**

PRES 2019 highlight areas for improvement in Postgraduate Researcher perception of Progression, a core bank of statements that includes questions around induction, monitoring processes and final assessment procedures. This section summary score was the second lowest across the survey and responses for the statements *I received an appropriate induction* and *The final assessment procedures for my degree were clear to me* both scored 5% below the Russell Group average. However, there are some positive results across the University, with Mathematical Sciences and Computer Science recording a number of 1<sup>st</sup> Quartile scores in this area.<sup>24</sup>

### ii. **Research Culture**

Following inclusion in the Student Voice Report 2017, Postgraduate Researcher perceptions of “research community” and their opportunities to become involved in their department and the wider campus community continues to remain an issue in PRES 2019, with Research Culture being the lowest scoring core bank in the survey:

	<b>UoB 2019</b>	<b>UoB 2017</b>	<b>UoB 2015</b>	<b>RG 2019</b>
I have access to a good seminar programme in my research area <sup>25</sup>	<b>63%</b>	71%	75%	69%
I have frequent opportunities to discuss my research with other research students	<b>64%</b>	62%	69%	68%
The research community in my research areas stimulates my work <sup>26</sup>	<b>58%</b>	61%	66%	63%
I am aware of opportunities to become involved in the wider research community, beyond my department <sup>27</sup>	<b>59%</b>	57%	62%	61%

Again, areas of good practice can be identified in Mathematical Sciences and Geography (JACS1).

### **Recommendations:**

- **A bank of Best Practice examples on PGR progression, assessment and research culture is collected and disseminated across the institution**

<sup>24</sup> PRES 2019 Advance HE data – JACS1 subject areas.

<sup>25</sup> Previously *My department provides a good seminar programme*

<sup>26</sup> Previously *The research ambience in my department or faculty stimulates my work*

<sup>27</sup> Previously *I have opportunities to become involved in the wider research community, beyond my department*

## 6. Access and Participation Plan

The Guild was pleased to collaborate with the University on the development of the Access and Participation Plan 2020/21 – 2024/25 and to be able to input on measures, targets and activities for the coming year.

### i. **Student Engagement**

The Guild welcomed the number of opportunities for student engagement and partnership outlined in the APP, in line with the Office for Students' robust guidance in this area.<sup>28</sup> Moving forwards, there is an opportunity to embed student engagement within the University's conversations on access and participation year round and the Guild is committed to working with the University to provide a variety of opportunities and channels for student engagement.

### ii. **Commuter Students**

The APP acknowledges that there are intersections of disadvantage faced by students at Birmingham, with varying impacts on access, participation, retention and success. For example, the APP demonstrates that locally-domiciled (or "commuter") A2B and Black students contribute disproportionately to the P4Q1 highly skilled employability gap, and targeted interventions have been developed to respond to these needs.<sup>29</sup>

Feedback from the Guild's active Commuter Students' Association often demonstrates that commuter students (who are often also mature, part-time and/or BAME) feel unable to participate or excluded from extracurricular activities, student engagement activities and/or wellbeing activities or face difficulties with timetabling and accessing academic support.

*As a commuter student, I found it difficult to get to know people on my course. I also work two jobs, which means that I have little time to join societies or get along with mostly middle-class students who do not experience my financial worries and have very different backgrounds (I am an ethnic minority student also). It is hard to get to know people when I only stay on campus, whereas everyone else is in accommodation. (NSS 2019)*

There is a clear learning opportunity here for both Guild and University services.

### **Recommendations:**

- **The Guild and the University partner to deliver meaningful training on Access and Participation issues and data to Student Reps, Part Time Officers and other relevant students, as part of a joint Access and Participation Forum**

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<sup>28</sup> Officer for Students, *Regulatory Advice 6: How to prepare your Access & Participation Plan*, Part I (2019). See pages 41-44.

<sup>29</sup> UEC.19.06.04a, Access & Participation Plan 2020/21 – 2024/25, Becc Lambert & Gemma Roadley

- **The Guild to undertake a specific research project on the experience of commuter students at the University of Birmingham, through recruitment of a student researcher. This project to include an examination of both the academic and extracurricular (including Guild services) experience of Commuter students on campus, leading to the development of action plans for improving Commuter student satisfaction.**

## 7. Support for Students on Study Abroad or Placement Years

The Student Voice Report 2018 featured a number of recommendations around additional support and information for students on Study Abroad or Placement Years. These recommendations acknowledge that, though many students report wholly positive experiences during their placements, emphasising enriched learning, transferable skills and language proficiency development, there are some areas of inconsistency across the institution in communications and support.

Though a considerable proportion of comments reference positive placement and study abroad experiences, some note difficulties with communication, course organisation, assessment and module choices:

*Again, lack of support on the year abroad made a difficult time even worse and I know I am not the only one to feel this way. **Emails regularly go repeatedly unanswered, documents are not returned on time**, there is not efficient communication between UoB and host universities, answers to students' questions are inconsistent, and overall there just simply does not seem to be enough time for supporting us adequately. (BSS 2018)*

*Year in industry is not well organised. I got little help with applications and whilst on placement email replies were slow. (NSS 2019)*

*Information on how the year abroad component is organised is confusing and contradictory due to lack of communication between the core team and the school/college representatives causing a lot of stress and confusion. (NSS 2019)*

It is also worth noting that there has been a drop-in student satisfaction with practice placements reported in the NSS this year, with satisfaction down 3% to 84.5% - though satisfaction with the information provided pre-placement is stable at 73%, this score remains below the sector % agree (77.5%).

### **Recommendations**

- **The University monitors the basic information that should be provided to students on a Year Abroad or Placement Year, in line with the Guidance Note on Placement Learning**
- **The Guild and University co-create clear communications for undergraduate students around the role of the personal tutor and expectations for both parties, including on Study Abroad and Placement years**



## Summary of Recommendations

	<b>Recommendation from Student Voice Report 2019</b>	<b>University and Guild of Students agreed actions</b>	<b>Further action undertaken by the University</b>	<b>On-going work to be conducted</b>	<b>Destination/Notes/Actions</b>
<b>1</b>	The University and the Guild, with the input of the E&D Ambassador Scheme and relevant student groups, to partner on a central priority communications campaign focussing on zero tolerance to racism on campus.				
<b>2</b>	The University to embed the recommendations of the UUK / NUS report on Black attainment into practice during the 2019/20 academic year, and to develop, a central toolkit on BAME student engagement, experience and support in partnership with the Guild.				
<b>3</b>	The University to require all staff and students to				

	undertake unconscious bias training, with enhanced training on dealing with conversations around race for all teaching and support staff.				
<b>4</b>	The Guild to work with the E&D Ambassadors to deliver a workshop on BAME experience and belonging at the next Guild Student Experience Day.				
<b>5</b>	The Guide to Assessment and Feedback to be disseminated across Schools and Colleges for inclusion in induction materials.				
<b>6</b>	The Guild work in partnership with the Director of Student Engagement to support the development of a Learning Agreement, that outlines student rights and expectations around assessment, feedback and learning				
<b>7</b>	The University and Guild work in partnership to fully				

	consult students on the implementation of the new Assessment cover sheet and to review impact by the end of 2019/20				
<b>8</b>	The University to ensure that specific activity and action around Assessment and Feedback is included in the Business, Psychology, POLSIS, Pharmacy and Computer Science School Education Plans.				
<b>9</b>	The Guild to audit Extenuating Circumstances information provided on School and College intranets, and to provide recommendations for standardisation.				
<b>10</b>	The Guild and University to work in partnership to review the Code of Practice on Extenuating Circumstances and additional Guidance for Staff and Students in this area				

11	The University to hold an Extenuating Circumstances Forum for Wellbeing Officers and relevant colleagues, to encourage consistency and sharing of best practice.				
12	The Guild and University to collaborate on standardised Plain English information (including a short animation and quiz) around Academic Integrity for dissemination via Pebble Pad, to ensure duplicate or out of date material is removed from the Intranet and to monitor uptake of the online academic integrity module				
13	The Guild and the University to track the implementation of the Student Rep Review via SRSAB and generate a bank of best practice examples in this area by the end of 2019/20.				
14	The Guild and University to work in partnership to review the Student Charter				

	and to develop the proposed Student Engagement Strategy.				
<b>15</b>	The Guild to host a Student Experience Day with a focus on closing the feedback loop and the Student Voice				
<b>16</b>	The University, consulting with the Guild, SEOs and students, to develop a consistent strategy for Student Experience Officer roles and priorities				
<b>17</b>	The University to develop a student communications strategy for the NATY project, including clear messaging pathways and student engagement activity.				
<b>18</b>	A bank of Best Practice examples on PGR progression, assessment and research culture is collected and disseminated across the institution				
<b>19</b>	The Guild and the University partner to deliver meaningful training on Access and Participation issues and data to Student				

	Reps, Part Time Officers and other relevant students, as part of a joint Access and Participation Forum				
<b>20</b>	The Guild to undertake a specific research project on the experience of commuter students at the University of Birmingham, through recruitment of a student researcher.				
<b>21</b>	The University monitors the basic information that should be provided to students on a Year Abroad or Placement Year, in line with the Guidance Note on Placement Learning				
<b>22</b>	The Guild and University co-create clear communications for undergraduate students around the role of the personal tutor and expectations for both parties, including on Study Abroad and Placement years				