

Provider submission - TEF 2023

1. Provider context

Birmingham City University (BCU) is a large university located in the heart of Birmingham – recognised as the UK's second city. BCU delivers a high-quality learning and student experience across 20 subject areas (CAH2), and 32 disciplinary areas (CAH3), with a number recognised as outstanding in the data. The University and its staff and students engage in and deliver research – the application of which - through regional, national and international enterprise - shapes the learning that our students experience. The synergy between education, research and enterprise informs our curricula, portfolio, and pedagogy.

The University is an integral part of the City's growth and success, across a diverse range of fields. Both current students and those who have graduated contribute to the city and its goals – from working as midwives and nurses to starting businesses and generating economic prosperity, and much more in between. BCU is the dominant university for students within the West Midlands to study within (2020/21) [1] with the University enrolling over 25,000 undergraduate students in 2021/22, of which 62% were home students. In Birmingham, the large student body is catered for with a staff – student ratio of 17.1 in 2021/22. BCU has three strategic TNE partners; Kaplan (Hong Kong and Singapore), Horizon (Sri Lanka) and Wuhan Textile University forming the Birmingham Institute of Fashion and Creative Art (BIFCA). The Office for Students (OfS) classifies the university as a medium-tariff institution [2]; with 15% of new undergraduate students recruited on to foundation years, and 85% directly into level 4 undergraduate programmes in 2021/22.

'To me, an elite institution is one that delivers for its students in the ways I've described: skills, jobs, and social justice. That's why I regard institutions like Birmingham City ... - as trailblazers for a newly prestigious technical education.' [redacted] 2022
(Times Higher Education conference)

This TEF submission celebrates BCU's teaching excellence and the transformative impact we have on our students, as confirmed in B3 and NSS data, and the impact they have, on the region and beyond. It also discusses the impact of our strategic work in supporting the needs of our students in the context of the regions from which they originate, both in the city and wider West Midlands, and further afield, as acknowledged recently by the Minister

of State at the Department for Education (box). And it highlights the importance of community and partnership working in delivering the education we do. This includes our undergraduate apprenticeship provision which is an integral aspect of our University. As such, it is deemed a strategic priority, and thus has been fully incorporated within our submission, recognising our responsiveness to regional, and national Government, skills need. We refer also to our undergraduate international students where appropriate, in recognition of the University's global learning reach. Key to this submission are the following:

1. BCU has a hyper-diverse student intake, which is central to the region's needs while also having national and international impact.
2. Notwithstanding the sometimes very challenging circumstances of our students, academic outcomes, student satisfaction and employability of our graduates is strong, aligning within or above sector benchmark.

3. There is strong evidence of an active academic improvement culture, which operates in partnership with our students, the BCU Students' Union (BCUSU), academics and Professional Services staff. The University's applied and experiential pedagogy is key to our success, and we are leading major projects to enrich the curriculum, and enhance the student experience: for example, in relation to work on mental health, diversity and inclusion; STEAM and digital.
4. Research activity continues to strengthen markedly within the University (staff and students) which enables and enhances student learning, whilst a new Grow Your Own scheme is creating pathways to academic careers for students who do not normally have these opportunities.
5. Enterprise and innovation activities are embedded in the curriculum, delivering opportunities for students to apply their knowledge to practice, and the unique STEAM agenda not only drives interdisciplinarity and entrepreneurship, but also engagement with industry partners and knowledge exchange.

Enabling students to transform their lives

The origins of BCU lie in a range of Birmingham colleges, the oldest of which was the Birmingham Government School of Design, founded in 1843 to support industry in the city to trade on a global stage. The twin heritage – of making through innovation and its application through knowledge exchange, and of creative and artistic research and practice – has remained central to our ethos as the University has evolved in the intervening 180 years, and today is reflected in an educational approach that is research informed, practice led, and applied. Our students learn through doing and applying their knowledge to practice, and are closely supported throughout their learning journey, achieving significant educational gain and personal transformation.

The mission of the University reflects its heritage. BCU is the university for the city, enabling students to transform their lives. Birmingham is a superdiverse city [3], standing out in contrast to other major UK cities, with 51% of the population being from Black, Asian, or other minority ethnic groups. BCU's student profile reflects the diversity of the city and region – with 60% of undergraduate students identifying as Black, Asian or from other minority ethnic groups. Equally significantly, the university's undergraduate intake is drawn from some of the most economically deprived neighbourhoods in the UK, with 64% of young entrants coming from areas of high-income deprivation (IDACI quintiles 1 and 2); while over half commute from the family home, rather than being based in student accommodation. In this context the relevance of the University's mission is clear.

BCU is located on two campuses. The City Centre campus is home to three of the four faculties (including the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire, housed in the first purpose-built Conservatoire building in almost fifty years), and STEAMHouse, which brings together our computing department, and students to work on interdisciplinary challenges alongside business start-ups and established corporates. Additional specialist city centre sites reflect the history of the University and its history in collaborative practice, including the School of Art, located in its original 1870s home of Margaret Street, and the School of Jewellery, based for over a century in the Jewellery Quarter and home of the BBC's 'All that Glitters'. The City South campus in Edgbaston is home to the faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences, where recent investment in skills and simulation facilities reflects the significant expansion in student numbers, and practice and disciplinary innovations. And aligned to our ethos of applied learning, plans are underway for our sports and exercise science courses to be relocated to the refurbished Commonwealth Games Alexander Stadium in Perry Barr alongside UK Athletics in 2023/24.

Academic excellence and engagement

The University Strategy 2025 (BCU2025) [4] sets out the following priorities: to grow to meet the demand from applicants, to enable our students to develop as individuals while they master their disciplines, to bring together the different learning cultures of STEM and Arts practice to deliver interdisciplinary learning opportunities that give all students a breadth of knowledge and skills for their future careers, and to ensure our graduates enter their future careers ready to achieve their potential. Supporting these headline priorities are three pillars: academic excellence; people and values; and communities and partnerships.

BCU's approach to academic excellence is built upon the 'Transforming the Curriculum' project which was implemented in 2017-18 and whose principles were: that curriculum should enable excellence; be practice-led and knowledge-applied; be research enabled; be interdisciplinary; and be employability-driven [5]. The 2021 Teaching and Learning Enhancement Strategy embeds and develops these principles through a digitally enabled curriculum, the 'I am BCU' graduate attributes, STEAM agenda, and expert educators [6], while the Access and Participation Plan (APP) 2020/25 ensures BCU addresses access and student performance in the context of EDI. Recent portfolio reviews of our curriculum ensures our offer is relevant, contemporary and academically focussed. The institutional importance of our people and values ensures that our students are taught by academics who are experts in their disciplines, and in their teaching practices. It is an approach that enables our delivery to be responsive to the needs of the professions and employers, and ensures that our students are creative, collaborative, and empowered. The impact of this approach can be evidenced in the success of our students.

The unwavering focus on delivering an excellent student learning and teaching experience across our undergraduate provision has driven our approach to continuous improvement in education through risk mitigation, engagement and enhancement. The data driven Course Monitoring and Evaluation (CME) process, introduced in 2020/21, sits alongside our strategic approaches to quality assurance, teaching excellence, student engagement and participation, to ensure our courses are not only delivering at or above targets, but also that they are evolving through early identification of issues, and with relevance of discipline, portfolio and connection to external opportunities **(SO6)**. This approach is undertaken in consultation with our student body and their representatives - the BCUSU - and secured through our Student Voice Committee and Student Experience committee. The direct reporting of these committees to Academic Board, through the Learning, Teaching, Assessment and Quality committee highlights the importance of the student body throughout our governance [7] and the ways in which we ensure that continuous improvement sits at the heart of our processes.

Working with communities and in partnership

Birmingham is one of the UK's key growth centres but is also home to communities experiencing some of the highest levels of deprivation and exclusion. For a large proportion of our students who originate from the city and remain in their original communities there are structural barriers and disadvantages to accessing labour markets. An increasing number of students (37%, FT; 43% PT; 61% apprentices) are drawn from the local, commutable area and thus regional factors directly affect student progression. As the 2019 report [8] from Impetus highlights 'It is better to be from a certain local authority area and only be mid qualified, than from another area and highly qualified. The NEET rate for high qualified young people from Birmingham is higher than the mid qualified

¹Not in Employment, Education or Training

group in Coventry'. The pandemic, along with pre-existing economic uncertainty in the region, has had a dual impact on BCU students. For our graduates it has meant greater difficulty in securing highly skilled employment in the region; for our current students it has resulted in considerable uncertainty in their ability to supplement their incomes. Indeed, much of this disproportionate impact of the pandemic on young people was driven by the fact that under-25s are more likely to work in sectors like hospitality, retail, and leisure [9]. However, it is testament to our industry- and practice-based ethos, against a very challenging employment environment, that we continue to ensure our students are competitive within the region, with BCU moving from 6th position (59.2% highly skilled graduate outcomes for 2017/18 qualifiers) compared with other West Midlands universities to 4th (56.2% highly skilled graduate outcomes for 2019/20 qualifiers) alongside Aston University, Warwick University and the University of Birmingham [10]. Plus, our students are highly employable (83.7% employed (3-year GO)) with 69% in highly skilled employment [10].

Beyond our engagement with approximately 3,000 organisations and businesses connected directly to our work on employability supporting student graduate outcomes, we support 1,508 apprentices across 27 courses aligned to 18 different apprenticeship standards. BCU offered its' first apprenticeship in 2015-16 in direct response to employer demand and specifically the workforce needs of local NHS Trust partners and commercial partners eg. BBC. Since the initial cohorts, our apprenticeship offer has grown and expanded through regional SME's and a full portfolio within Nursing and Midwifery including Nursing Associates. A successful Ofsted inspection into the University's training provision was carried out in March 2019 with a 'good' outcome, reflecting a solid quality approach to supporting learners [11]. Seventy-six percent of BCU apprentices are currently training within Health and Life Sciences, whilst further expansion of apprenticeship training delivery is planned informed by a new Degree Apprenticeship Strategic Plan 2022/27.

A note on the pandemic

Clearly, the pandemic impacted all HEIs and their students, and it would be wrong not to flag here the approach BCU took to ensuring our students continued to receive a high-quality learning and teaching experience. Given the profile of our students and the University's status as both a civic and anchor institution, we ensured safe campus space was provided for our students throughout the pandemic, with our City Centre campus Library and learning spaces remaining open throughout and with the majority of contact time continuing to be physically delivered as soon as we were able. The Pledge [12] was implemented throughout 2020/21 with a focus on ensuring learning outcomes and wider practice-based approaches could be delivered safely. This was supported by a considerable investment in technology and digital learning opportunities that continues to be developed as part of the £60m investment strategy.

The Digital Design project (**SE4**) was developed and implemented in summer 2020 in response to the rapid move to remote learning. Investment in an externally designed train-the-trainer course informed design team sprints with academic module leaders in revising their resources, design, and delivery from the remote-student perspective. As the approach required close module team working with the Digital Design teams, courses with lower NSS outcomes were targeted. Over Summer 2020, 50 workshops with 300 members of staff were delivered. The approach provided a foundation for staff to gain confidence in remote delivery and heat map surveys carried out by the Student Union, which were deployed throughout the year, highlighted the impact of the work. The May 2020 survey [10] ranked; 'inadequate online lecture content', 'lack of learning resources online' and 'lack of interactive lectures' as priority issues. However, by May 2021 these issues had

been sufficiently addressed so that they did not appear as priorities to be addressed. In addition, the NSS 2021 Covid question 5 'I am content with the delivery of learning and teaching of my course during the covid-19 pandemic' (BCU 46.5%; sector 44.7%) suggest a positive impact for the students. The Digital Design approach is not time-limited and continues to develop best practices for module and course leaders, and our approach to digital learning and teaching is now supported by a £60m Technology Strategy 2022/27. Student recognition of the steps BCU took to respond to the pandemic and maintain health and safety shows above-sector-average agreement to the Covid-related NSS questions (Table 1). Our practice-led approach required changes to pedagogic practices which have resonated with the students throughout the past four years (**SE1**) and are covered within the aspects below.

	BCU	Sector (England)
COVID1. I have received useful information about changes to my course from my university or college during the Covid-19 pandemic.	78.51	72.02
COVID2. I have received timely information about changes to my course from my university or college during the Covid-19 pandemic.	68.43	62.34
COVID3. My university or college has taken sufficient steps to support my mental wellbeing during the Covid-19 pandemic.	50.56	41.23
Total number of respondents (FT taught students)	2,639	143,089
Response rate	52%	39%

Table 1: NSS 2021 COVID question responses

Nevertheless, recognising the risk to learning, and working closely with our BCUSU, the University's regulations were revised in May 2020 to introduce safety net and no detriment procedures. A review of the impact of the revised regulations on student outcomes was undertaken in April 2021 and updated regulations were in place for 2021/22, with a new set of Emergency Regulations approved in 2022, alongside new Academic Regulations which will be implemented in 2023/24. Face-to-face teaching, with social distancing and face masks, was employed for the first semester of 2021/22 and subsequently bolstered by a Campus First approach. Throughout the past few years our staff have been exemplary in the agility in responding to changing needs of the pandemic-constrained learning environment (**SO1**), as articulated throughout the submission .

2. Student Outcomes

Educational Gain

We are rightly proud of the breadth of experiences and motivations of our students, drawn from a diverse range of backgrounds, and our endeavour is to enable their personal transformation so that they fulfil their aspirations through, and beyond, university. By understanding our students' starting points, and working collaboratively with them, our approach to their educational gain is to nurture and coach ambition, build aspiration, and develop confidence, knowledge, and competence in all that they do, in both cohort and personal learning settings. Our goal is to enable our graduates, no matter what their starting point, to gain social capital and enter their future careers ready to achieve their potential (**SO4**). Educational gain for BCU targets the synergetic relationship between the personal and the educational in the transformation of our students – from transition into university, whilst at university learning mastering their disciplines and on graduation and into the world of work.

Our approach to educational gain begins well before enrolment into the university. BCU's success in recruiting from diverse and disadvantaged backgrounds is engendered in a positive and

² Our submission is structured according to the Student Outcomes and Student Experience aspects and the features of excellence are identified throughout using brackets at key points of evidence.

innovative approach to outreach and transition to university, reflected by our APP [13]. More than 60% of our young entrants in 2020/21 are the first in their family to go to university, 64% are from IMD quintiles 1 and 2, and 52% of our young entrants align to Free School Meals eligibility. The majority (55%) of our UK domiciled entrants in 2020/21 are of Black, Asian and Minority ethnicities, and this proportion is growing year on year – with some quite distinctive movements including a growing proportion of Black African entrants [10]. We are therefore proud that we have been successful **(SO5)** in exceeding access-related targets and have reduced the gap between the most and least (POLAR) represented groups (5.9% (2017/18) to -2.6% (2021/22)) and the gap in POLAR Q5 and Q1 for white students (8.4% (2017/18) to -1.8% (2021/22)) [10].

Our innovative approaches to transition can be felt across the region. The Royal Birmingham Conservatoire leads the externally funded programme 'SoundLab' providing free at point of delivery music education to young people (300 since 2017/18) across Birmingham [14]. Through our BCU Forward programme, BCU works closely with partner schools, including Hampstead Hall Academy designing a bespoke, embedded school engagement programme which includes study skills and delivery of academic tutoring. The programme also includes work to foster engagement with the wider community with activities involving parents and carers. Our appetite to assist and develop alternative and novel models for higher education to support secondary education is reflected in our recent partnering with the Black Country Multi Academy Trust to sponsor the Shireland Biomedical University Technical College. Our approach also includes the joint collaboration with INTOUniversity, within the Kingstanding neighbourhood, which started in 2020 and provides targeted after-school academic and personal development opportunities. The gains in attainment and confidence of the students have already been seen [15], even with the challenges of the past years: with a 47% uplift from the local average (29%) of school leavers getting into university following engagement with the INTOUniversity programme, alongside the benefits for our own students who act as mentors and buddies. We aim to create a further two community based strategic partnerships by 2025/26.

Our approach to education gain continues within the curriculum and wider student experience. We are clear that personal and professional development comes through a responsive, engaging and stretching curriculum alongside personal and collaborative experiences gained experientially. The principles of our cross-university Transforming the Curriculum project were embedded across all courses in 2017/18 as a Transformation project, and the full impact of the coordinated approach is now being felt by students at all levels of study. Our Graduate+ scheme **(SO3)** has embedded the graduate attributes across the curriculum: professional and work-ready, problem-solver, enterprising, and having a global outlook across all courses. Our ethos of practice-based and knowledge-applied curricular enables students to gain real world, industry-relevant experience as exemplified through the School of Jewellery work for the Commonwealth Games. Close partnership working by the School of Jewellery with Birmingham Council since the IAAF games in 2018 led to our students being commissioned to design the 2022 Commonwealth Games medals. A competitive process led to the winning team designing all the medals with the full student body of the School having the experience shared. The benefits are not just subject-relevant experience and skills, but also improved transferable skills such as communication and working with employers, external exposure and development of industry contacts, the opportunity to test themselves outside their comfort zone, and as a consequence, confidence and aspiration. Of the 5,500 students who completed the NSS in 2022, 80% agreed that their communication skills had improved. Indeed, they themselves have recognised this publicly through their 'I AM BCU' concept. This concept,

³ International Amateur Athletic Federation

latterly used as an external-facing campaign, originated from students who used the term across social media. When interrogated, students told us that, for them, being part of the BCU community meant three key attributes – pride, confidence and belonging. Today, the campaign has evolved to encompass the University's approach to empowering student engagement and success.

BCU2025 [4] recognises the diversity of our student body and commits to support all our students through an experience that is personalised and inclusive, enabling individual transformation and achievement **(SO1)**. Our approach to transitioning into and through BCU underpins our Student Outcome indicators, with high levels of completion for our full-time students, and above benchmark rates for part-time students, Asian, Black students and those eligible for Free School Meals. These sit alongside outstanding Student Experience indicators for students' satisfaction related to assessment and feedback. The effectiveness of our approaches, as a medium tariff institution [2], is seen in the value-added outcome which, controlling for entry qualifications, increased from 0.96 to 1.03 in 2019/20, with 78.5% graduates gaining a good honours degree [10]. Our students are highly employable and articulate the gains in social capital through heightened social mobility. Of recent UK domiciled BCU graduates, 70% were in high skilled professional employment or undertaking further study, whether from households in the lowest socio-economic backgrounds NS-SEC (6/7) or living in the most deprived neighbourhoods or both IMD Q1 and NS-SEC (6/7) that live in the Birmingham area. Compared with the likelihood of young adults to be in professional or managerial class by age 40-46, ranging from 66% for those from professional class households falling to 40% for those from routine or semi routine parental occupation class households [16], the powerful impact of our approach is evident [10]**(SO5)**. The TEF Provider submission, alongside the student submission, articulates our educational approach and the impact BCU delivers for our students. Throughout the submission a data-driven and evidence-based approach is articulated and, thus, we continue to evaluate the gains made by our students and ensure a responsiveness to all our approaches to student success - evidence related to educational gain are highlighted for clarity **(SO4; SO5 and SO6)**.

Pursuing Excellence (SO1)

Underpinned by BCU2025, we enhance student engagement through a research-enabled approach to transition into university, a practice-led curriculum, inclusive assessment **(SE2)** and targeted support, plus Life Coaches **(SE5)** and Student Support Advisers **(SE7)**. This holistic approach is articulated in our APP [13], which has contributed to a reduction in the gap in good honours for young and mature students (8.3% (2017/18) to 3.1% (2020/21)) indicative of the positive impact of the more flexible remote assessment approaches. Our strong performance related to continuation, completion and progression are covered below **(SO2 and SO3)**.

Very high rates of continuation and completion

Overall, very high rates of continuation and completion **(SO2)** are identified for our full-time students. The range and effectiveness of the support are students engage with is articulated in the outstanding completion for our Asian and Black students and those eligible for Free School Meals. All students have the benefit of support **(SE5)** provided by the Centre for Academic Success (CAS) accessible to any student, whether they are on placement, studying part time, have additional responsibilities, are working at a remote campus or on the main University campus, CAS involves a 'Success Plus' programme of workshops throughout the year, delivered both online and in-person, aimed at providing individualised guidance for students to improve academic literacy and study skills to aid transition and academic development. CAS also works with academic teaching staff to tailor these sessions to disciplinary requirements, making them relevant to the subject and

related career pathways. In 2021/2022, attendance numbers for these workshops and tutorials exceeded 14,500, with many students attending a series or programme of workshops to wrap-around their timetabled subject classes.

Support from CAS is extended for our international undergraduates through a bespoke English for Academic Purposes provision. This support, alongside the individual support provided through our BCU International College (BCUIC; together with Navitas) ensures a tailored approach, which is reflected in the above benchmark NSS satisfaction in academic support **(SE5)**. Over the past four years the mixture of non-UK students has changed from level 6 top-up years to the latest (2019/20) entrants being predominantly within BCUIC. The non-UK continuation indicator reflects both the strong, within benchmark (90.1% (2016/17-2018/19)) outcome and the significant impact of the pandemic on 2019/20 entrants (77.4% continuation), who were unable to complete and financially support their studies [10]. The strengthening of our partnership with Navitas and close support of BCUIC students is showing good signs of enabling our students to transition successfully into BCU courses.

BCU recognises that an inclusive academic support **(SE5)** offer requires increasingly tailored approaches, including coaching. For students repeating first year modules, the Life Coaches in CAS provide bespoke 1:1 sessions. In the 2021/22 academic year, 52% (218 students) of repeating students took advantage of the Coaching provision, with 686 meetings held [10]. Life Coaches identify barriers and issues **(SO5)** impacting student engagement, attendance, learning and assessment on their course. The Life Coaches also create a network of support through regular contact with course leaders, personal tutors and school administrators. Alongside the range of tailored approaches identified below within the Student Experience section **(SE5)**, it is a testament to the inclusive academic support that BCU has very strong continuation and completion **(SO6)**.

Practice-led and knowledge-applied curriculum

Our subject areas show high quality outcomes for both continuation and completion **(SO2)** and several subjects are above benchmark for completion: Economics, Computing, Engineering, Health and social care and Architecture, building and planning. Our practice-led and knowledge-applied curricular provides a framework for strengthening course stretch, skills, community, and enabling strong student outcomes. The BCU Law Clinic is an embedded placement opportunity within the curriculum for all Law students to work closely with Central England Law Centre and the Support Through Court charity. Since 2021, 100 Law students have been involved in clinics related to Welfare, Housing and Immigration engaging with over 900 calls taken and 445 people provided with access to legal advice – gaining client-facing skills and extending knowledge [17]. In the School of Architecture, the Superstudio is a weekly opportunity for all full-time students to engage in a creative, collaborative, and multi-disciplinary environment which reflects the School's "design through the scales" ethos and reinforces our embracing of interdisciplinary working and collaboration. This year, Superstudio had over 780 student registrations for over 40 different sessions run by staff and visiting guests: analogue, digital and workshop skills, experimental workshops, cross-discipline opportunities, competitions, and additional referral tutorials. Specific sessions are recommended to students through a diagnostic induction process and personal tutorials to support individual student development. Through Superstudio students build relationships with colleagues and peers beyond their course which fosters peer learning and nurtures the School community, supporting student experience and a sense of belonging **(SO5)**.

The outstanding completion rate for economics reflect a strategic endeavour over the past years to enable an inclusive curriculum and assessment very much responding to the student voice. The Economics subject at BCU stands out from the sector in terms of the composition of the student body as students from Black, Asian or Minority Ethnic backgrounds (BAME) constitute 70% of the cohort in 2020/21. The benefits of the approach have been seen in the attainment gaps reducing (White and BAME gap fell from 16% to 6% between 2018/19 and 2020/21 on the targeted level 5 module (QME5016)) – and, indeed, in students satisfaction returning to high NSS satisfaction levels (84.5% (2022)) related to student voice [14](SE7).

There are two of our full-time subjects; English Studies and Sports Exercise, which in past years have shown below benchmark continuation. Our in-year course monitoring and evaluation (CME) process enables evaluation of impact for all our courses, and a responsive approach to risk mitigation. For these targeted subjects, actions focussed on changes to address level 4 module pass rates and the benefits are seen in the recent-year (2020/21) uplift in continuation for both English Studies (92.6%) and Sport Science (80.8%).

Digital-enabled curriculum

High quality and outstanding student outcomes are also underpinned through an excellent student learning experience, particularly related to assessment. Our strength in providing assessment preparation, marking criteria and feedback is reflected in the outstanding, above benchmark, NSS score for assessment and feedback, across all splits related to disadvantage and ethnicity. The development of the Digital Assessment Centre has enabled all assessment to be moved online and we are one of very few universities to undertake proctored exams, thus ensuring academic integrity of remote assessments. The team of dedicated digital exam specialists work with staff across the University to design, create, deliver, monitor and review digital assessments at all levels, enabling innovative exam design combined with options for automated or on-screen marking, as well as various levels of invigilation. This flexible, student-centred, and inclusive approach to exams provides the opportunity for students to take their assessments in a familiar home environment, whilst also offering those who do not have facilities or equipment to undertake remote exams, the ability to use a dedicated exam space on campus.

Recognising the issues relating to digital poverty, a campaign initiated by the BCUSU implemented a digital support fund where all students with household income below £25,000 were given a laptop-for-life. To address digital poverty to the best of our ability, 2,425 students received laptops across all Faculties in 2020/22. The benefits to our most disadvantaged students in having a personal laptop can be seen with 87.5% of those students who received a laptop progressing to the next year or completing their award [10], compared with the 80% stage progression or completion of those students who applied but were either not eligible or didn't collect their laptop. Indeed, those students who were awarded a laptop (2020/22) were less likely to withdraw (10%) than those that applied but didn't collect a laptop (15.4%). The overall gains in embedding the flexibility of online assessments, together with proactive resource support, is also seen in relation to exam anxiety where we have seen a year-on-year reduction in the percentage of extenuating circumstances applications since online assessments were implemented (21.1% (2018/19); 10.9% (2021/22)) [10]. Thus, our approach over the past years to assessment has consolidated our strategy towards inclusive assessment.

Inclusive assessment

The BCU approach to inclusive assessment has been informed by our involvement in external

collaborative (**SE3**) projects; QAA collaborative project on 'Inclusive Assessment' with 8 other members of University Alliance [18] (2020/22 and additional funding 2022/24), in addition to a QAA 'Addressing Racial Inequalities in Assessment' collaborative project led by University of Leicester (2020/22) [19]. The outcomes of both projects focussed on student readiness for assessment. In a response to these outcomes, the digital assessment team at BCU have developed bespoke training for students around basic digital literacy and digital exam systems and feedback from academic staff on the effectiveness of this preparation has been very positive. At a module level, the Psychology teaching team implemented greater use of peer marking and use of example answers in a final year module which students confirmed were helpful for understanding what they were required to do in the exams. A rewarding reduction in the attainment gap between different ethnic groups was reported at the exam board: in 2020/21 the gap was 5.7% and in 2021/22 the gap was 2.4% [14].

Our curriculum-level approach with inclusive assessment and tailored academic support are responsive to different requirements of our student cohort, with our apprenticeship students also showing high rates of continuation and completion (**SO2**). The high-quality continuation provides a view of the impact of the changes in place in supporting student retention and stage progression since the initial 2015/16 and 2016/17 intakes of apprenticeships. The completion indicators (**SO2**) relate to the first two intakes of apprenticeships. The completion indicators reflect students withdrawing from FdSc Health and Social care with pregnancy and covid-related redeployment being key factors. For learners able to return to their apprenticeship, and the current cohorts, intensive course-level work has placed increased emphasis on tripartite meetings to ensure workload support for the learners and mentors within the course in addition to practice-based trained mentors. The recent ESFA audit (2022) [20] reported those having a break in learning being well below ESFA risk threshold, thus noting the pro-active arrangements and impact on apprentice retention and completion.

Our *part-time students*, since 2016/17, are largely studying ACCA accountancy modules, BEng Mechanical Engineering, BSc Fundamentals of Primary Care Nursing (General Practice Nursing), BSc Professional Practice and HNC Construction. The ACCA encompass individual papers to help prepare students for their externally held professional papers. For the past 12 years BCU has held Platinum status as an approved learning partner of the ACCA in recognition of continually achieving pass rates at, or above, global averages. However, the modular offer is one in which students choose to take tuition for individual papers in any order and are assessed externally. Thus, the student outcomes metrics do not best reflect the offer. In response to students requesting an embedded approach to the ACCA-recognised outcomes, we are realigning the curriculum offer for future years. The part-time indicators overall show a strengthening continuation profile against benchmark for 2016/17 and 2017/18 entrants, the latter (69%) materially above benchmark. However, the most recent cohort in the data (2018/19 entrants) were greatly impacted upon by the pandemic due to most of the part-time students being in the NHS and construction industry and thus pre-pandemic outcomes will be reflected in future years.

For part-time students within the health service, NHS trusts and private sector, the Faculty of Health, Education and Life Science (HELS) has dedicated HELS Navigators who guide and provide advice related to recognition of prior learning, choice of modules and credits to meet their Continuing Professional Development (CPD) needs. Many of the learners have trained prior to

⁴ The composition of the part-time cohort of students has changed following a review of course codes in 2015/16 where our flexible modular credit provision was not subsequently coded as part-time courses. Thus, our part-time students, as a consistent data cohort, started from 2016/17, and the 4-year average has some legacy skewing reflective of the large modular credit accumulation provision earlier part-time students were enrolling upon (allied health and nursing and midwifery).

1996 or are internationally trained and thus require advice as to the best pathway to attain the required 'level 6 study' for registration. The HELS Navigators provide the wrap-around advice and ongoing support for learners, recognised by the increasing continuation rate, noted above, and high-quality completion. In recognition of the HELS Navigator best practice, a recent award from Health Education England is funding the development, through the BCU 'Grow Your Own' scheme (see below), of Student Nurse Support Navigators. These roles will drive the 'aim to prevent, support and succeed' project ensuring monitoring and support for all nursing students through their studies and supporting the NHS workforce for the future.

The above benchmark part-time student completion indicators reflect both the legacy nursing and midwifery modular provision and current allied health course, engineering, and ACCA modules. For Engineering subjects, the below benchmark completion is largely due to one course – CertHE CPS Manufacturing Systems – which was delivered for an employer between 2010/1 and 2014/15. The course was a 60 credit offer which was designed as ten stackable credits of specialist modules with both learners and employer opting for module completion rather than achievement of the award, thus the strength of the provision not being best reflected in completion indicators. The BEng Mechanical Engineering course which remains within the part-time offer, albeit small numbers, has outstanding completion (90.2%; 4-year average) [10]. The employer-facing needs of the part-time courses and learners is reflected in strong progression to graduate employment.

Employability-driven

Our employability-driven curriculum is designed to enable a smooth progression to employment, with all Schools proactively working with their Industrial Advisory Boards to ensure the content and skills acquisition are relevant to current industry needs. Exemplars of the approach and its impact are identified below and within the student experience (SE3). The impact of our approach is highlighted by the outstanding progression indicators for our white students (72.6% materially

Case Study: 'I arrived in the UK [redacted] ... I started completing my Graduate+ Bronze award and this allowed me to start writing a CV. The Graduate+ website also had multiple resources that improved my interview skills and job searching, which improved my overall confidence...I believe Graduate+ has helped me rebuild my personal and social identity in this country.'

above benchmark), alongside the reduction in the gaps in progression rates between least and most (IMD) deprived neighbourhoods (6.9% (2017/18) to 5.5% (2019/20)), between white and Asian students (15.9% (2017/18) to 15.6% (2019/20)) and the progression rate for care leavers has increased (61.0% (2017/18) to 71.4% (2019/20)). For those who are employed, BCU sees an increase in those receiving >£24K salary (34% (2017/18) and 60% (2019/20)).

The embedding of our graduate attributes; professional and work-ready, problem-solver, enterprising, and having a global outlook, across all courses is driven through the curriculum content and our Graduate+ scheme. Graduate+ was endorsed by AdvanceHE as a sector-leading initiative in 2019, due to its structured (Bronze, Silver and Gold), multi-faceted approach; accessible online personal development tools, credit-rated skill-based learning outcomes and dedicated 'Grad+ weeks' providing a wealth of development sessions (see case study). In recognition of its unique approach, it has been commissioned by Munster Technological University in Cork for a 3-year agreement, providing an opportunity for joint research into student engagement, experience and employability. Embedding Graduate+ learning outcomes within level 4 modules enables the cross-university approach to skills acquisition with 3,520 (2022/23) students currently actively involved in their Bronze award. Engagement from our APP represented

groups has remained consistent with 61% ethnicity, 16% disability and 58% IMD1/2, supporting our inclusive focus. The benefits of the award can be observed through the reduction in withdrawals (9.7% Graduate+ versus 15.3% non-Graduate+) (2017/18 - 2021/22 entrants) and increase in completions (78.8% Graduate+ versus 72.7% non-Graduate+) (2017/18 - 2020/21 entrants). The educational gain **(SO6)** is most clearly observed through the significantly heightened good honours (51% (1407 Grad+ students); 21% (11,547 non-Grad+)) [10] for graduating students (2017/18 - 2019/20 entrants) who engaged with Graduate+, reflecting the impactful approach on our students in fulfilling their potential. This impact on attainment – educational gain - is particularly impressive noting the strong engagement of our APP targeted characteristic student groups.

To maximise graduate opportunities, doctoral study and support the diversification of the BCU workforce, our 'Grow Your Own' programme is an innovative approach initiated in 2021. In its first year, 33 graduates were recruited onto the programme into higher level employment with the targeted approach enabling 36% of the graduates meeting diversity, disadvantage and care leaver characteristics [10]. A requirement of the programme is a commitment to undertake a Graduate+ Gold award and the Professional Mentoring programme – thus synergising the impact of the skills and mentoring approaches to graduate employability. The Grow Your Own programme is expanding to include the Student Nurse Support Navigator as part of a recently awarded Health Education England-funded project **(SO1)**.

Case study: [redacted]: .. through BCU and their partnership with Sunset+Vine, I was placed with [redacted] ... and I was lucky enough to be offered a role within their company when I graduated. Securing a role in television by itself is already difficult enough but trying to pursue this career as [redacted] makes it that even more difficult.

Outstanding progression is identified in eight of our subject areas; Allied Health, English Studies, Media, Performing Arts, Education, Medical Sciences and Psychology. The outcomes for students progressing into the health service and education sector are reflective of the strength of the courses, the resilience of our students, and our strong partnerships with NHS Trusts, allied services, and schools. Although the strong employability of students undertaking health and

education courses may be expected, the outstanding progression in subjects where students need navigation towards the steps in their career aspirations; Performing Arts (33rd percentile CUG comparison), English studies (37th percentile) and Psychology (27th percentile) are testament to the BCU approach to practice-led curriculum and careers support in these particular subject areas. Development of skills and experience relevant to our students' chosen careers is an integral part of all course curricula, in the manner most appropriate to their discipline of study. The Birmingham Institute for Media and English partnered with Sunset and Vine and other companies to enable 75 of our Media students to work across most of the Commonwealth Games' venues as camera operators, floor managers and footage editors. The approach has led to [redacted] graduates being directly employed within the sector (see case study). Within English, student successes include the publication of poetry anthologies by [redacted] graduates,

[redacted]. Graduates have also had their work shortlisted for major literary prizes, most recently [redacted] for the Mslexia Short Story Prize [redacted] and founded the literary journal Poetry Birmingham whose editorials were reviewed as 'intellectually lithe and provocative' by the Times Literary Supplement. The experience and expertise of our academic staff and exposure to external role-models in the form of inspirational guest lectures and masterclasses supports this learning

and teaching ethos, but this is far from the only way in which the University delivers upon its commitment to our students.

For the Psychology subject area, there are year-on-year increases in the progression level across the three years of GO (8.5% above benchmark (2019/20)). This is due to increased levels of both further study (+2.7% compared to 2017/18) and substantial placement provision within the prison service, the NHS as Assistant Psychologists, and mental health support in secondary schools, ensuring graduate level job offers. The latter opportunities are enabled through the Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training embedded **(SO5)** across the course and led by externally recognised researchers within BCU [21]. From evaluations taken from all staff and students who have completed the MFHA training, a significant increase is found in their knowledge and confidence in how to support someone experiencing a mental health difficulty. The majority (94.9%) of participants reported that they were unlikely to judge people with mental health difficulties after attending the MHFA training, thus enhancing students' employability skills and their professional practice.

A subject grouping which is not best reflected in aggregate progression indicators is Materials and Technology. Due to revalidations and aligned HECOS coding of the courses within the group, progression outcomes reflect some very low numbers of leavers. Thus, there is only the 2019/20 reported year reflecting the dominant courses of BSc (Hons) Music Technology and BSc (Hons) Sound Engineering. Reviewing the Graduate Outcome data for the courses a stronger progression outcome is observed suggesting that subsequent years of the Materials and Technology subject outcomes will appropriately reflect the student's employability within the sector (72.8% (2017/18 qualifiers); 79.5% (2018/19 qualifiers); 63.8% (2019/20 qualifiers)), particularly as the industry recovers post-pandemic.

All our *apprentices* are employed and following completion and graduation are retained in the workplace. We are acknowledged as having a strength in enabling a seamless progression into employment as noted in the 2019 Ofsted report which states 'Leaders and managers set high expectations for apprentices and have successfully developed a curriculum that enables them to gain the skills they need for sustainable employment' [11]. The progression indicators **(SO3)** do not best reflect the employability of the apprenticeships due to the extremely low numbers of overall qualifiers. The progression of the fullest cohort (Allied Health) is aligned to benchmark although, there is a provider-level impacting outlier from the Health and Social Care subject group (19/20 entrant cohort) largely reflecting the low/medium skilled coding of some of the roles eg Maternity Support Worker. However, the strength of progression for all our other apprenticeships (Architecture, building and planning (100%); Engineering (81%); Medical sciences (100%); Nursing and Midwifery (89%)), provides a confidence that the strong progression will be better reflected as the aggregate numbers of apprenticeship increases.

The Careers+ team operate a wide range of activities open to all students, with additional targeted activity for groups of students identified through the course they study or through personal characteristics such as disability or ethnicity. BCU Careers+ teams engage with our students from enrolment to post-graduation. All applicants complete a Career Readiness survey, as part of enrolment, throughout their course and post-graduation. Our triple-tick approach targets all students who are early in their career readiness and also meet APP criteria (3,197 students in 2022) and, as such, are actively contacted and prioritised for services and opportunities. The 'triple tick' approach has enabled a move from generic to targeted method of support for students within Business and Management. BCU's Professional Mentoring programme is a key initiative in which

the students (500 final year and graduates in the past year) participate [10]. Students are matched with an employer mentor and carry out a 10-week mentoring programme. Mentors are encouraged to provide opportunities for their mentee to visit their workplace and to support their mentee in widening their professional network. The students (completed the survey) highlight the impact of the programme on their confidence for interview (72% satisfaction), job searching skills (88%) and the benefits of networking (88%).

Students, including those in Business and Management, are also supported to undertake a professional placement year and are more likely to progress into positive outcomes (81.9% professional placement versus 59.2% non-professional placement (96 respondents to the GO 2019/20 survey). The benefit of a placement is also seen in those students undertaking a micro-placement (77.8% undertaking a micro-placement versus 58.7% non-micro placement progression (2019/20 GO survey) [10]). Business and Management students benefit from the bespoke HeadStart Placement Programme which provides work experience opportunities to level 5 and 6 students within the Business School. The initial intake (2021-22) had students with 66% currently in full-time employment and 42% are in highly skilled employment. The programme will continue to scale up to ensure wider impact across the Business School courses. Alongside this programme a range of initiatives are available: PRINCE2 Foundation course and a CIMA-hosted employability-focussed business games where 40 students were involved in each game, which aimed to familiarise students with the assessment centre activity within graduate recruitment processes. As social media skills have become an integral aspect of the competencies expected of students and graduates in the job market in the digital age, BCU partnered with a Birmingham agency, Nonsensical, to deliver a four-part 'social media' masterclass. The course has been delivered annually with circa 50 students engaging [10]. All these initiatives and other curriculum-embedded Graduate+ and Careers+ support will impact progression for future years.

Students on Sociology courses also have tailored initiatives available. The subject area has seen a 4.5% increase since 2017/18 of students in further study, and graduate-level employment is predominantly within the Police and welfare professional sector (31.5% highly skilled SOC outcomes). Close partnership working with employer recruitment ensures that students are best prepared for the rigors of an assessment centre recruitment approach. Mock assessment centre sessions delivered by the Civil Service engaged 33 students in May 2022 and our partnership also enabled Civil Service Fast streamers to join the BCU Mentoring programme. In addition, programmes such as the Social Work Training programme and National Graduate Development Programme, which has engaged 25 students in each programme (2021) builds the awareness of competency-based assessments, so critical for recruitment in front-line service providers [10]. The Social Impact Hub [14] is an exemplar of our approach in supporting Social Science students' graduate attributes, civic engagement, acquiring practical skills, moving towards a focus on public good and giving responsibility back to our students (SO4). It includes a bespoke internship programme with Birmingham Pastors that will provide an opportunity for students to develop work-based learning. The 'Outreach' Pastors operate daytime patrols of two or more people around the city centre. The collaborative project has seen us develop a bespoke recruitment, selection and training approach designed to link up with other current university initiatives, such as Graduate+.

Alongside the Professional Mentoring programme, the Graduate Re-Tune project, funded by the OfS, works in partnership with Aston University and Jobcentre Plus. By July 2022, the project achieved a total of 630 positive outcomes including 287 Graduate Level Jobs and 74 Graduate Level Kickstart Job Placements,. As part of the project, a unique Graduate Opportunities Gateway

for the Government Kickstart Scheme has been embedded into project delivery. Working with West Midlands Police, a key target employer for our Sociology students, the project designed end-to-end recruitment services to deliver high quality Graduate Level Kickstart Job Placements and assisted 34 students to secure placements. In addition, a further 67 graduates secured Kickstart Job Placements with other employers. The success of the project for our graduates and employers in the region was recognised through winning the 2021/22 AGCAS Award for Excellence for building effective partnerships.

3. Student experience

Pursuing Excellence

Our curriculum is responsive to the needs of the professions and employers, inspired by research and enterprise, and enabled by expert educators and secures that our students are creative, collaborative and empowering. Our students have reflected the high quality of our courses and teaching delivery (**SE2**), through the NSS outcomes for 'teaching on my course' and 'learning opportunities'. Indeed, this is not only the final year students, as highlighted by the BCU Voice internal survey where 2,977 students (2021-22) agreed with statements including 'taking responsibility for my own learning' (89.8%), 'my course has challenged me to do my best work' (82.6%) and 'my course provides me with opportunities to bring information and ideas together from different topics' (84.1%) [22]. Our part-time students, as for our majority-mode full-time students, have shown an increase in their satisfaction related to high quality teaching and assessment over the past four years [10] (teaching on my course: 68.2% (2019), 86% (2022); assessment: 65.7% (2019), 75.4% (2022); academic support: 65.5% (2019), 80.6% (2022)) reflecting the targeted work undertaken across all our modes of delivery.

Practice-led, knowledge-informed and research-enabled curriculum

A focus on research informed, professional and practice-led education is part of our heritage and forms a core part of our institutional identity and pedagogy. Many of our undergraduate courses are approved or accredited by Professional and Statutory Regulatory Bodies including the Royal Institute of British Architects, the Institution of Engineering and Technology, British Computing Society, Nursing and Midwifery Council, Health and Care Professions Council, CIPD, ACCA and the British Psychological Society. The excellence of the academic experience with outstanding teaching and courses which stretch students to actively engage is imbued by our research-enabled curriculum. Our staff are researchers, and our students learn their research; then learn about research and doing it, and they practise research through modules and capstone projects.

Our courses in Business and Management, Sports Exercise, Performing Arts and Computing are four of eight subjects which have outstanding indicators for teaching and assessment (**SE1**) and very much reflect our approach to a research-enabled academic experience. Drawing on the Business School's 3* REF [23] internationally recognised research in entrepreneurship education, the Marketing Link Agency and the Business Advice Centre are two examples [14] of where employability and entrepreneurship education coalesce. The agency provides an innovative method of embedding employability and entrepreneurship within this discipline through a live student-led marketing communications agency. Launched 10 years ago, the approach has provided tacit knowledge, to our predominantly first-generation students (**SO5**), related to industry norms, entrepreneurship within the context of marketing, and access to networks and employability through experiential learning, while providing a knowledge exchange framework for the businesses we work with. Over the past four years there were five live projects, involving clients such as

⁶ Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS)

Warwickshire Cricket Club, Cure Leukaemia and Claudia's Kitchen. Employers report the benefits for their SMEs and charities and course tutors highlight the knowledge transfer gained from modules studied from level 4 onwards. Our strong partnership with Warwickshire Cricket Club is interdisciplinary and research within the department of Sport and Exercise is directly impacting the lack of professional cricketers with a South Asian heritage and thus driving new approaches to inclusivity and reflecting the diversity of our student body.

Case Study: I have gained a wide range of skills from taking part in this research project, including the ability to conduct research on a niche topic, presentation and public speaking skills, communicating and coordinating with team members, and the ability to adapt to new challenges. [redacted]
[redacted] (Level 6 VRA Student)

The 3* research within the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire emphasises the excellence of the interdisciplinary and cross-collaborative work within Performing Arts. The Royal Birmingham Conservatoire Composition Cluster undertakes its 'for-Wards' research which reaches a wide audience through the participation of diverse community groups in a city-wide compositional collaboration. Our REF-impact as a civic

university with international reach is also articulated by research from the Faculty of Computing, Engineering and Built Environment where improved Augmented Reality is addressing the challenges in creating more realistic interactions and experiences for use in real-world settings. The 3* research has global reach through collaboration with GlaxoSmithKline pharmaceutical company and NHS practitioners and directly informs our success with enabling students into further study and up-skilling the workforce, through our MSc Artificial Intelligence and CPD, funded through the OfS, and Knowledge Transfer Partnerships (SE3).

Knowledge-informed research and innovative employer engagement

As detailed above our focus on practice-led education is underpinned by research (SE3). We have 80 Professors and 36 Readers and in REF2021, 93% of our research was recognised internationally with 19% judged world-leading. The expertise of our staff is also reflected in external honours, most recently this year Dr Kamal, from the School of Social Sciences, was recognised with an MBE for her significant contribution to understanding the psychological impact of Covid-19 on the public. We are now working to submit over half of our staff in REF2028 to further inform our curriculum offer and our student learning experience. Our focus on the application of research is not just in terms of curricula content but also in the way that we support students to think as researchers by making them part of the academic community from the beginning. This ranges from using real-world examples to illustrate course content to employing students as research assistants, where possible, culminating in them gaining a publication before they even graduate. Voluntary Research Assistantships (VRA) scheme (see Case study) is an initiative across the Faculty of Business, Law and Social Sciences, which enables students to work alongside academics on active research projects including: Decolonising the Law, United Nations' Universal Periodic Review and Legal technology as a module. The project aims to celebrate high achievement and to enable students to develop advanced skill sets [14]. Research is also used to improve the way students are taught, both within BCU, but also in other institutions across the world. Colleagues in the Faculty of Health Education and Life Sciences have worked with Lusaka College of Nursing since 2015 and the work was enhanced over the pandemic where Health Education England funded a unique virtual volunteering programme - a 'hub and spoke' model to attract NHS Volunteers from across the UK. BCU acted as the in-place local hub and critical care nurses working in acute NHS Hospitals acted as the 'spoke' and provided specific clinical practical

expertise as required. Using this model up-scaled the reach of clinical practice expertise and facilitated access to the range of expertise requested by our Zambian partners, at a pivotal time through the pandemic and for the future [24].

Our regional impact is seen in the 'Arts in STEM' or STEAM agenda through both the curricula and STEAMHouse. The concept was first conceived in 2014 to co-locate businesses and students to deliver graduate enterprise hatcheries and new pedagogic approaches built around STEAM Innovation. Since then, BCU, together with civic leaders, secured £17.5m in capital to support the STEAMHouse building. STEAMHouse includes space for production workshops, artist studios, start-up businesses and immersive application, SME growth space, co-working space and social learning areas. A key ethos for any members and businesses working in the spaces is their commitment to support future talent **(SO5)**. Tenants co-located in the building sign up to engaging with the student community through mentoring, projects, internships, and graduate roles as part of the tenancy process **(SO3)**. Members who are growing in number (currently over 1,000) are also encouraged to support wider community benefits and are actively encouraged to engage in events which showcase student work and to consider student know-how as an opportunity for engagement **(see SO5)**.

Our role as an anchor institution in Birmingham and the wider region, and as a civic university, is reflected in our BCU2025 mission to be the 'University for Birmingham'. The recent Knowledge Exchange Framework (KEF) outcomes recognise the impact of our work in supporting business growth (Higher levels Skills Match (HLSM)) **(SO3 and SE5)** and reducing skills gaps through CPD and graduate start-ups **(SE5)** (High Engagement rating KEF 2022) [25]. Close partnership working with regional employers has also involved the HLSM project for which BCU are the lead partner, working alongside Aston University and Newman University. Part-funded by the European Social Fund, which has engaged with SMEs in the local area, to identify their skills needs, and understand how students and graduates are able to support businesses. In doing so, HLSM has engaged with 230 businesses. The project has provided skills support to 750 students, graduates, and local residents, winning the AGCAS Award for Excellence in both 2019/20 and 2021/22, and exemplifies BCU's approach to regional employer partnerships, benefitting students and the industry. The STEAMHouse incubator has 22 resident businesses in the incubator with approximately 86 employees using the space, and three are BCU student/graduate businesses. The companies 'Ones Trainers' and 'Frow' have had student placements with 'Frow' having had over 40 students from fashion and media on 3 months/6-month placements since the incubator opened in March 2020 and currently have in situ [26]. This year we launched our STEAMHouse hatchery **(SO3)** with 65 final year students/recent graduates signing up. The hatchery provides access to experienced mentors. The ten-week programme culminated in the submission of business plans and pitches, which are scored and assessed by business leaders from across the city. In total, 35 business plans were submitted, and 15 students are now located in the pre-incubator launching new businesses [14].

Our 'Inspired Festival' has provided an annual showcase for students **(SE7)** within the Faculty of Art, Design and Media, with shows over two weeks enabling peers and wider community to view project outputs. Under the heading 'showcase student creativity through business partnerships', InnovationFest has been built up over the past decade and embedded **(SE7)** across all years of the courses in the Faculty of Computing, Engineering and Built Environment as a STEAM-informed collaborative project. Business partners from Santander, Cisco and Amazon, together with our Knowledge Transfer Partnership (KTP) students directly inform and engage with the student

project teams to advise and challenge. All the projects are presented in an annual InnovationFest symposium, enabling industry employers to engage with the students on the design concepts and project outcomes. Indeed, our KTP students [14] highlight the importance of the InnovationFest event for enabling their next steps into companies to start their research – at year end 2021/22 BCU had a portfolio of 25 KTPs. Thus, a recognition of our strength in connecting students to the world of work, with BCU currently ranked 9th in the sector and the fastest growing institution for KTP growth.

Expert Educators (SE4)

Our teaching staff are also active practitioners or researchers in their field of expertise (**SE4**). The REF2021 highlighted the impact of our research which has made a significant contribution to teaching policy reflecting our mission to place learners, practitioners and their communities at the centre of the teaching and learning agenda. The University invests in its research base in teaching and learning in Higher Education, which is spread across the University. Academic staff from all disciplines are encouraged to undertake an MEd (currently with 20 registered staff) or an EdD (50 staff) and apply their research in their regular teaching. Along with an annual conference on learning and teaching, thematic interdisciplinary conferences place research and practice to the fore – the ‘COVID-19: An unequal impact?’ conference in 2021 saw

, and
, lead an interdisciplinary conference week of seminars [27] highlighting the unequal impact of the pandemic – a theme which resonated with the lived experience of our diverse staff and students. This approach leads into a community of researchers, practitioners, and students from a range of disciplines and contexts who explore a wide range of education settings. This means that academics from all disciplines can continue their research into this area and develop their expertise throughout their career at BCU. Our staff have been successful in securing QAA collaborative grants, building on partnership working with University Alliance and regional communities of practice and informing the outcomes related to inclusive assessment (**SE2**). As a result, our staff are expert teachers, with opportunities to develop their pedagogy regardless of their level of experience.

All academics are required to achieve a PGCert in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education during their first two years in post, with this leading to them becoming Fellows of the HEA. Our technical staff are also enabled to undertake qualifications towards Fellow status, an approach which is forming part of our Technician Commitment. The PGCert was aligned with the apprenticeship standards (Academic Professional Apprenticeship (APA)) in 2019 and since then circa 45 learners per year have undertaken the APA/PGCert. Sixty-four percent (1045 members of staff) of our full-time academic staff are currently accredited by the UKPSF [28], including 150 Senior Fellows and 20 Principal Fellows of the HEA, National Teaching Fellows (NTF) and CATE winners in : the High Achievers Recognition Scheme (HARS) (see later) and University Assistant app (**SE5**). Staff are active in supporting subject associations, with many also serving as assessors for the NTF and CATE schemes.

High quality support for all learners (SE5)

Given the diversity of our student body and their varying degrees of familiarity with higher education, BCU delivers a positive and supportive transition (**SE5**) to university which prepares our students for success – a key aspect of our Educational gain (**SO4**). Over the past three years, Welcome Week, which is jointly delivered by the Students Union and the University, has been

responsive in providing a basket of opportunities, whether remote or on-campus, with a focus on social welcome, wellbeing, belonging and academic transition – following the student needs. The effectiveness of this transition and wraparound support is particularly reflected in our international students with an above sector satisfaction (90.2% BCU; 89% UK ISB) with ‘overall arrival’ [29] and a strong NSS, which are above benchmark: teaching 84.9%; opportunities 85.3%; assessment 76.5%; support 82.9%; student voice 80.0%) (NSS2022 had 247 respondents with an 86% response rate).

In 2022 we launched the cross-university ‘Transitions Project’ embedding the key principles of community and confidence enabled through a multi-channel communication plan. The design of the Transitions project was directly informed (**SE3**) by our involvement in the DRIVER transitions project [30] and in the current ERASMUS+ Transitions project (ENTRANTS) [31]. An academic resource pack enabled a consistent theme across all academic orientation sessions with the aim to boost self-awareness, online mental health access and reviewing digital literacy and safety skills. 869 engagements with the digital literacy tool have been recorded since its launch in June 2021, which according to Jisc is above sector average, thus providing confidence that we are building digital skills capability for our learners. The full semester-long Transitions Project was designed to build upon the welcome and orientation week and includes mid-semester embedded initiatives at the 50-day pinch-point, such as Graduate+ week (**SO3**) and Refresh for Success week (245 student bookings with a 53% attendance). Although early days, the impact of signposting support and enabling confidence to submit assessments has been seen in the increase in first time pass rates, particularly for new students (93.2% (2022/23); 78.1% (2021/22)) [10]. We will continue to build on the success of the implementation of the Transitions Project, evaluating and monitoring engagement and impact for all our students.

Our coordinated, cross-university approach has enabled us to provide high quality support for all our *apprenticeship* programmes; large cohorts of apprentices from large NHS Trusts or multiple learners from SMEs. Our responsive approach to the needs of NHS partners is seen in our provision incorporating both higher and degree apprenticeship courses. Our apprenticeships are supported through a central Apprenticeships and Partnerships Unit (APU) which assists with on-boarding requirements and monitoring needs throughout the student journey. The APU, Faculty apprenticeship leads, and course leaders work closely together to ensure a strong level of support and advice – seen through the increasing quality of continuation over the past four years. The role of the apprenticeship leads is to monitor progress, coordinate tripartite meetings and liaise with employers and apprenticeships to provide the specific support required for successful apprenticeship outcomes. Employers (**SE3**) agree with our on-boarding (76% ‘getting new apprentices started’ and 72% ‘initial assessment of apprentices’) and training facilities (93% agree) [20]. Designated personal tutors mentor the apprenticeships whilst in the university and liaise with line manager mentors within the apprenticeship workplace. Thus, providing a strong apprenticeship-specific learning environment (**SE2**), reflected by the apprentices’ own feedback (81% agree with ‘supporting you and your apprenticeship’ and 75% ‘resolving and issues you have’) [20].

BCU recognises the benefits in support for staff development and sharing best pedagogic practice for apprenticeship leads (**SE4**). The apprenticeship course leaders’ forum has been in place for more than a year, meeting three times a year as an open forum for sharing best practice, with a pedagogy viewpoint. External speakers in () UVAC ‘Delivering excellent practice to degree apprentices’; ‘Degree apprenticeships in England:

⁷ Data Responsive Initiatives as a Vehicle for achieving Equity in Results (2017-2019)

current practices in design, delivery, and quality management') have enabled a wider view of sector practice and the sharing of best learning practice. The high-quality teaching (**SE1**) is evidenced through the annual increase in provider level-NSS outcomes for 'teaching on my course', which is now materially above benchmark with our accumulating cohorts of apprentices. High quality outcomes are also identified at subject level, and the 2022 ESFA 'My Apprenticeship' feedback [20] confirms apprentice satisfaction with 'well-structured training' (75%), 'accessible training resources' (88%) and 'balancing online learning with classroom-based training to suit your apprenticeship' (75%). The high quality of our approach to assessment and feedback, which is outstanding across the provider as a whole, is also reflected by our apprentices. The flexible nature of the online assessments plays particularly well for the apprentices who are able to balance deadlines appropriately with work requirements. The NSS outcomes (2021 and 2022) for the Chartered Surveyor (Quantity Surveying) have seen a welcome increase in satisfaction across all question areas, in response to the focus on assessment support and timely feedback (26.7% increase (Q8); 16.6% (Q9); 35% (Q9); 5% (Q10) (2021/22)) [10]. The support for all apprentices to ensure successful achievement of the end-point assessment is reflected in the 75% agreement with 'ensuring you understand the requirements of your end point assessment' [20]. The academic support (**SE5**) available for the apprentices, in addition to the personal tutor/mentor support, has informed the strength of the high-quality outcomes in the NSS, with the BEng Broadcast and Communication Engineering and FdSc Health and Social Care apprentices being satisfied above benchmark. The wrap-around support has shown itself to be able to flex for cohort size, with high quality outcomes for the very large Nursing Associates course. However, it is acknowledged that the changes currently in place with dedicated seminars for the cohort, enabling peer-community and specific advice and guidance, would have benefitted the smaller cohorts (Chartered Surveyor (Quantity Surveying) in previous years. Student support for the changes is reflected in the increase from 53.3% (NSS 2021) to 83.3% (NSS 2022) in 'I have received sufficient advice and guidance in relation to my course' [10]. The specific work with smaller cohorts is particularly important where cohorts are built from multiple companies and thus require community building when at the university. Indeed, employers are strongly in agreement (87%) in the work we undertake to support smaller cohorts [20].

Our approach to educational gain (**SO4**) in understanding our students' starting points, and working collaboratively with them, to nurture and coach ambition, build aspiration, and develop confidence, can be seen in the High Achievers Recognition Scheme (HARS). HARS was established in 2015/16 and is unique within the UK in supporting students at university-level to step on and step up, maximising their potential to become the best that they can be (awarded CATE 2018). HARS provides enrichment opportunities across four tracks: Personal and Professional development; Advanced Academic Success; Voluntary and Community Opportunities; and Internationalisation. Utilising a Value-Added score, the scheme has positively impacted (**SO5**) upon those students who took part and graduated over the past 3 years (2018/19 to 2020/21) [10]. All students, whether in HARS or not, showed an increase in value-added outcome given the same pre-entry qualification success and subject of degree, from sector data. However, engagement with HARS provided an increase in value-added, particularly seen for the 181 students who did not enter with high levels of attainment but were identified as showing progress in terms of their academic grades (value-added score 1.29 (HARS) versus 1.2 (non-HARS)). Thus, providing a strong advocacy for the educational gain (**SO4**) provided by extra- and intra-curricular approaches.

Physical and virtual learning resources (SE6)

Our students benefit from an investment of more than £430m across the campuses and sites. Our heritage sites – the School of Jewellery and School of Art - are specialist facilities, in some of the city's most beautiful heritage buildings. Plus, more recently in our City South campus, we have added a £45m extension to our main building with new health sciences laboratories and sports facilities, all of which offer industry-standard facilities and the highest-quality learning environment that enables our students to achieve their personal, academic, and professional goals. These facilities, which can be used by students both as part of their course and for additional independent study, ensure that students have experience with the most up-to-date equipment relevant to their practice and in a realistic environment prior to entering the workplace. Teaching facilities across the entire estate include: a green screen room; mock healthcare facilities including an operating theatre; a fully functioning x-ray room; a replica law court and crime scene room; CAD/CAM suites and much more. Many of these facilities are of such high quality that they are hired out commercially (when not required by students) to local, national and international companies – for example, our green screen facility has been used by CBBC, the BBC Asian Network, Maverick TV and Punch Music. A range of equipment, such as state-of-the-art cameras, is also available for students to hire. This enables students to undertake independent projects and to practice using industry-standard equipment, meaning that they can direct their own independent learning in the way most appropriate to their needs and goals.

In all our subjects, we create a professional setting in which students can develop and practise the skills and knowledge that they will need in their chosen career, whilst they are in a safe environment in which they can stretch themselves and take risks. Supported work simulation is therefore key to many of our programmes, both through virtual learning technologies and physical environments that replicate the workplace. The state-of-the-art healthcare simulated facilities are immersive in nature and reproduce substantial aspects of the real world in an interactive way enabling students to practice their skills in a safe environment where there is no risk to patient safety, and which enhances students' situational awareness. The simulation and telehealth facilities enable BCU to deliver innovative pedagogy and placement experiences that are reflective of contemporary healthcare practice.

Our *responsive digital solutions* approach ensured the continued investment in enabling students to have access to IT software and hardware through the development in 2020 of the Windows Virtual Desktop and remote software access, thus providing students with access to software as if they were using a university workstation - this complete solution gave students the ability to engage with software packages from any location. Students are reflecting the benefits of this flexible and accessible approach with year on year increases in named users continuing once fully returned to campus (from a zero baseline in May 2020 to 6508 users in October 2022) [10]. Access to the full range of Adobe Creative Cloud software, at no cost to the student, has provided those studying on creative courses with professional level tools on their own personal devices. We also embedded JISC-enabled Alibaba Cloud environment, to secure access to our VLE, Moodle, and other course materials for TNE students studying on BCU courses in China. This approach ensured students had an equivalent experience and were able to study effectively. These benefits are reflected in above sector NSS2021 Covid responses (content with delivery of L&T (COVID5) 46% (BCU), 44% (sector); able to access learning resources (COVID6) 76% (BCU), 76% (sector)). Over the past two years, the increasing campus-first approach has enabled students to retain the benefits of the remote infrastructure investment and re-engage with the physical specialist facilities

and equipment - reflected in an increase in NSS2022 of 7.4% related to learning resources [10].

Under the banner of '*Bringing the Library To You*' our Library is accessible to students wherever they are located, whether remote or on campus: Curzon city centre and City South campuses in addition to libraries within the satellite sites. Ensuring our students have access to the learning spaces and library resources to support the expectations of our practice-led courses is paramount. Our approach to ensuring our City Centre campus remained safely open throughout the pandemic has been recognised by our students in the NSS2021 Covid questions (Table 1, above). Our library spaces used a booking system to ensure social distancing, books, Acting scores and music scripts were quarantined throughout the pandemic. Unsurprisingly, there was a significant increase in students using the 'Bringing the Library To You' Service during the pandemic. The impact of our investment in digital resources and our 24/7 contact a librarian service is still being felt, with a 28% uplift in engagement with out-of-hours support from 3500 contacts in 2020/21 to 4000 in 2021/22. Indeed, the engagement with bookable places has also increased compared to last year with a 32% increase in space bookings and a 20% increase in in-person enquiries at the City Centre Library, highlighting the importance of the library learning spaces for all our students [10]. The Library successfully maintained accreditation to the Customer Service Excellence standard in January 2021, retaining ten 'Compliance Plus' elements. With customer insight being a crucial element, the Library has demonstrated the inclusion of the student voice through initiatives such as "How to..." engagement events and mystery shopping. Student feedback is at the centre of our responsive approach and, since March 2022, items suggested directly by students via the 'suggest a book' link have been purchased via Demand Driven Acquisition – highlighting the responsiveness to student needs in the support we provide.

We are rightly proud of the service and support provided to *students with declared disability* and 80% of disabled students responding to a Disability Service survey rated their support 'excellent' or 'good' (2021/22) [10]. The Disability team engage with students prior to starting their course, providing remote or in-person welcome to the team and individual discussion of support requirements with a dedicated pre-entry advisor. Students with screening results indicating moderate to high possibility of dyslexia receive a Disability Support Summary (DSS), pending a diagnosis. The DSS makes important recommendations for adjustments to the teaching and assessment of the student and by the end of 2021/22 there were 2,422 students with DSS in place. This interim support partly mitigates the barriers caused by lack of access to Disabled Students' Allowances until students have a formal diagnosis. As dyslexia diagnoses are not available on the NHS, BCU fund a formal dyslexia diagnosis for every student who we assess as needing one. In 2021/22 we carried out approximately 545 dyslexia screenings (computer screenings and physical screenings) and we funded 258 dyslexia diagnostic assessments. We have also extended this support to those students with suspected ADHD and autism, where we have screened 121 students (2021/22) for ADHD and 72 (2021/22) for autism and, pending diagnosis, we are able support through a DSS. The proactive approach of our Disability team meant that our APP target to increase reporting of disability has been achieved (11.4% (2017/18) to 14.4% (2021/22)) and we have seen a very rewarding closure of the good honours gap for students declaring a cognitive disability (7.5% (2017/18) to -0.4% (2021/22)).

The University's *Mental Health and Wellbeing* team provides a range of support from Wellbeing Advisers, Mental Health Advisers, and Counsellors. All staff are appropriately qualified and trained and participate in regular continuous professional development activity. The team operates a one-at-a-time therapeutic model, ensuring effective use of resource and empowering students to decide

how and when they wish to seek support from the team. The University is a proud member of the University Mental Health Charter and intends to secure a Mental Health Charter Award in 2023/24. Work in this area is led by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, overseeing a working group comprised of staff and student representatives, and supported by an aligned Student Advisory Group made up solely of students. All the University's work on mental health and wellbeing is underpinned by our innovative secondment of a psychiatric nurse from the Birmingham and Solihull Mental Health Foundation Trust. The secondee acts as mental health strategic lead within the University, driving improvements in key areas such as clinical governance, serious incident responses, and information sharing with third parties (especially the NHS). The expertise and flexibility embedded within the Mental Health and Wellbeing team enables the delivery of an effective, easy-to-access service which is highly valued by students – as evidenced in feedback gathered from service users (average 4.45 for overall satisfaction (scale 1-5 stars (excellent) 2021/22) [10]. Future plans will embed both learning and mental health analytics to enhance our responsiveness to all our students requirements.

Students as partners

The Student Voice committee, led by BCUSU, provides a forum to discuss key campaigns from the SU and ensure close partnership working in student representation system. The SU officers

Case Study: 'At the start of my university life, I wished that there was an outlet where I could make the most of my university experience. Becoming a ChangeMaker has enabled me to provide a service that I needed during my time in University'

fully inform the periodic review process ensuring that quality oversight and assurance places the student voice at its heart. The approach to involving students in the periodic review process was recognised through an invitation to present at the 'Evolving Student Engagement' QAA Conference where our students co-presented the BCU approach [32]. As part of our involvement in

the OfS-funded DRIVER [30] project related to addressing barriers to success, Student Success Advisors (SSAs) were embedded within each Faculty from 2017/18. The SSAs are recent BCU graduates and, line managed by the Associate Deans, engage in activities to improve retention, progression, and student support. The teams work proactively (**SO1**) on transition activities, Student Voice Councils, pulse surveys and providing bespoke advice to students identified through the Student Engagement/Attendance policy. To enhance engagement, the SSAs make key interventions with students who have low attendance profiles or who are due to take resits. Emails followed by a text message provides an effective contact mechanism with a general response rate of 75% (2021/2). A targeted campaign in the Faculty of Computing, Engineering, and the Built Environment to 1602 home students with below 40% attendance in March 2022 increased engagement to 85% of the disengaged students and enabling individualised support. [10]. The engagement and heightened response rate were particularly key as we moved out of the pandemic 20(21/22), where students reported having low motivation and financial pressures. The central role of students as partners in informing staff- and student-facing approaches is reflected in the outstanding NSS indicators for Computing, Materials and Technology, English, and Media subjects.

Our investment in students as partners (**SE7**) helps to drive the excellence of our learning environment alongside building graduate attributes (**SO5**). The Student Digital Champions and Student Library Mentors have directly informed staff development (**SE4**) in relation to the remote learning environment through designing staff resources to assist staff in understanding approaches from the student's perspective and continue to challenge and inform our staff resources. A similar

approach has been taken with the Changemaker programme which is now growing to encapsulate a wider set of areas for students' development **(SO5)**. The ChangeMaker Programme (see Case Study) involves students who are keen to support others who might benefit from peer-to-peer relationships, whilst promoting and showcasing the range of support and opportunities available. This approach enables different types of conversations with academics and students ensuring that we are never complacent and always striving towards supporting the personal transformation and wider aspirations of our students.

Being responsive to our full student body places the student voice **(SE7)** central to our strategic intent and the confirmation by our students is seen in the high-quality impact of the NSS indicators with six of our subjects being above sector benchmark. The strength of our focus on student voice is pleasingly also reflected by the apprentices with high quality NSS outcomes. Ensuring that all learners whether attending full time, part time or through an apprenticeship can engage with their course leaders and the SU student representation scheme is key. Thus, the ability to engage either remotely or on campus in student voice fora is an asset to capture, and respond to learners' feedback

The Student Voice **(SE7)** plays a significant role in informing our approaches whether through national surveys, NSS and Health Education England survey to placement students (NETS), or internal surveys. Across all courses BCU undertakes mid-module reviews in addition to pulse surveys through our University Assistant App (which was a CATE 2019 winner). BCUSU proactively supports the Student Voice Councils, which provide a forum for course and school student representatives to identify areas to which the School/Institute, Faculty or University responds. The close liaison between the Student Union and Faculties in engaging course representatives can be seen in the increasing numbers [306 course representative (2021/22) and 480 course representatives (2022/23)]. Alongside this responsive approach throughout the academic year, BCU has designed and implemented the BCU Voice survey – an annual course level survey for all non-finalist students, including our BCUIIC, those on placement and students in TNE provision. 2021/22 was the first year of implementation and 2300 respondents completed the survey (13.5% response rate) [10]. The responses were disseminated, at course and level of study, to the faculties within the academic year, thus ensuring students saw a clear feedback loop for their comments and related actions. **BCU Student Union submission:** As testament to the effective and strong partnership between BCU and the BCU Student Union we are delighted that the Union has undertaken to write a student submission.

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