

## Section 1: Institutional Context

1. Birkbeck is the UK's only specialist provider of evening education and one of only two institutions in the UK classified by HESA as a majority part-time provider. Since the foundation of the College in 1823, Birkbeck has provided higher education to people who would not otherwise have had this opportunity. The College's founder, George Birkbeck, had a vision of the power of education to transform and improve lives, and this founding commitment to social change and widening access remains at the forefront of our mission today. Although the way in which the College achieves its objectives has necessarily adapted over the decades, our original ethos has stood the test of time.
2. Birkbeck is one of the UK's smallest multi-faculty, research-active universities with 7,610 full-time equivalent (FTE) student numbers, equating to 10,600 individual students.<sup>1</sup> We aim to offer breadth and depth in our subject choices and are currently organised into 18 departments within five academic schools each led by an Executive Dean.<sup>a</sup> The education brief in each school is led by an Assistant Dean reporting to the Executive Dean who both work in close collaboration with the PVC for Education. Birkbeck offers a broad range of part-time and full-time programmes, from foundation year through to doctoral study. Most teaching takes place on weekday evenings, giving students with work and/or caring commitments the opportunity to study for a University of London degree whilst maintaining these other commitments during the day. Our students study intensively; part-time degree programmes are four years and full-time, three years.<sup>b</sup> Whether taking their first steps on the career ladder, changing career, or fitting study around family and working life, students come to Birkbeck because we strive to support and enable diverse life choices. Creating a diverse student community is core to our mission and our overall student body reflects the diversity of London itself. During the TEF assessment period 57% of our UG students came from Black, Asian or minority ethnic backgrounds.<sup>2</sup>
3. Until the mid-2000s, Birkbeck was almost exclusively a part-time institution; we introduced full-time UG degrees gradually from 2008. The higher fees from 2012, and absence of a maintenance loan for part-time students until 2018, resulted in a reduction in demand, but not desire, for part-time study.<sup>3</sup> As part-time study is often a more suitable mode for mature people and those with work and caring responsibilities, we hope that this reduction in demand is a trend that will be reversed with the anticipated Life-Long Learning Entitlement from 2025. In the last decade many of our students have chosen to study full-time to access a maintenance loan and/or to intensify their study period due to living costs. This is not an easy route for people with work and caring responsibilities and up to 15% of Birkbeck students who enrol full-time change to studying part-time over the duration of their degree, many take a break in study for a year or more, and some can take six or more years to complete their degree.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>a</sup> We are currently consulting on a reorganisation to simplify our structures while maintaining academic breadth (reduction from five schools to three faculties and from 18 to eight departments). At time of writing, no staff changes have taken place.

<sup>b</sup> Birkbeck has a small cohort of UG apprenticeships as chartered managers and in digital technology. Students performed well on these programmes, as confirmed in a November 2022 Ofsted visit which found that "apprentices attend well, make rapid progress, and most achieve distinctions in their final assessments. A high proportion of apprentices gain promotion on completion of their programmes" (p12 of report). The balance of evening teaching was not so attractive for prospective partner employers, so the College is teaching out these programmes.

4. By 2020-21, 55% of our UG students were studying full-time.<sup>2</sup> Nationally, within the current TEF period, 78.1% of all full-time UGs were under 21 and 56.7% were White.<sup>5</sup> This contrasts with students at Birkbeck where 35% were under 21 and 39% White, over the same period. Students under 21 are in the minority at Birkbeck and are different from the UK population of school leavers who enter higher education. In 2020-21, our under-21 UG population could be characterised as follows: 12% were studying part-time, 63% had less than 96 UCAS tariff points, 16% declared a disability, and 56% were from the lowest two IMD quintiles. These school leavers are likely to be studying with us because of circumstances which prevent them enrolling for a typical campus-based university experience – such as caring for a child or parent, work commitments, or negative experiences at school. In the case of low tariff students, contextual admissions are used to offer them a place to study because of evidence that they have greater ability than their entry qualifications suggest.
5. The average age of a Birkbeck student is 33. Over half of our part-time undergraduate degree (UGD) students<sup>c</sup> in the TEF period were over 31 and 65% of our full-time UG students are over 21. Most of our students live at home with friends, partners, parents or children.<sup>d</sup> Within the TEF period, 84.5% of UG students reported the same term time address as entry postcode.<sup>4</sup> In our 2022-23 enrolment survey, 12% of FT and 36% of PT UGD students reported that they had dependents, and 78% of students reported that they were working either full or part-time.<sup>6</sup> We have invested significantly in providing online learning resources and recorded/hybrid sessions to provide flexibility to support our ‘time-poor’ student body, and our facilities stay open late to deliver both in-person and online support.
6. Over the TEF period, 15.6% of FT and 18.7% of PT UGD students declared a disability nationally, whereas at Birkbeck the population of disabled students is greater, at 22.3% and 20.3% respectively.<sup>5</sup> Of those who declare a disability 84% have more than one disability and 20% of students with a disability also have a complex mental health condition. Students are supported by specialist Disability Advisors and Mental Health Advisors and through study skills and mental health mentoring. The College has prioritised inclusive practice so that learning is more accessible and disabled students face fewer barriers to study. On enrolment all students with disabilities are prompted to complete a study support plan through which disabilities are declared and reasonable adjustments are identified, removing barriers to access, and ensuring all the appropriate support is in place for the academic year. Our careers service also leads on excellent work to support the aspirations of disabled students (see para. 83).
7. Birkbeck’s Access and Engagement department oversees the development of new and existing relations within local authorities, primarily in Newham and Camden. Birkbeck works with community partners, FE colleges, schools, employers, adult learning providers and universities, interlinking with the civic engagement agenda and collaborating with our local communities to develop knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make a difference. Our outreach programmes in local communities encourage many to take that first step towards higher education. Birkbeck has a range of different access routes on to its degrees providing opportunities for all irrespective of their previous educational achievements. We have helped generate successful collaborative activities (Community Leadership programme; HE Short courses; joint ventures around employability and transferable skills relevant to university study),

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<sup>c</sup> As explained in para. 58, many of our part-time undergraduate students are enrolled in modular study for which a degree is not the intended outcome.

<sup>d</sup> Please note, the TEF dashboard data, which is based on ONS travel to work codes, does not accurately reflect this.

and long-standing programmes of work, promoting access to higher education and advising on educational and career pathways.

8. Birkbeck was the first University of Sanctuary<sup>e</sup> in London. The Compass Project (2018 Guardian Award Winner) was established in response to the war in Syria seven years ago to develop partnerships, expertise and resources as a holistic response to supporting vulnerable and excluded forced migrants. Since its inception, over 100 students have enrolled to study at Birkbeck via the Sanctuary Scholarship Programme which offers strong wrap-around support from application through to completion. This student lifecycle approach has influenced the way Birkbeck engages with other vulnerable students through student and academic mentoring, start of term preparation sessions, pre-sessional English and social gatherings.
9. Birkbeck has a wide range of funds and bursaries to support students, each scheme is designed to meet specific needs e.g., costs of study, childcare, digital learning, and costs relating to an unforeseen change in a student's personal situation. Birkbeck spent £643,880 on student financial support in the 2021-22 academic year. This year, we anticipate increasing this by approximately 10% to meet needs arising from the cost-of-living crisis.
10. Research is important at Birkbeck; our students are taught by leading researchers. Our scholarship informs public policy, delivers scientific advances, supports the economy, promotes culture and the arts, and makes a positive difference to society. Our research strengthens the quality of our educational provision with nine research institutes, 44 research centres and 663 research students also contributing to the quality and success of our teaching activities. In the most recent REF exercise, 83% of Birkbeck's research was assessed as being 'world-leading' or 'internationally excellent' (up from 73% in the 2014 exercise).
11. Birkbeck has responded to the increase in numbers of younger and full-time students studying with us, as well as the evolving needs of our traditional, mature and part-time student body. In 2017, our newly-appointed PVC Education led a review of our student experience and outcomes.<sup>7</sup> The review encompassed all aspects of the student journey from registration to award. The resulting Student Experience Review report was approved by Academic Board and followed by a detailed implementation plan for 2018-20. Actions agreed included renovation of the Birkbeck Library, comprehensive revision of academic programme structures and academic regulations, improvements to education governance to enhance reporting and communication, engagement with students to enhance the mechanisms for the student voice to be heard and acted upon, review of assessment and feedback processes to facilitate the implementation of best practice, and revision of personal tutor policies.
12. The Student Experience Review (SER) implementation plan has brought about considerable change despite the disruption of the pandemic and its implementation facilitated mitigating actions for Covid-19. For example, the purchase of new student survey software (the *Blue* system from *Explorance*) enabled us to conduct swift and effective surveys of our student body throughout the pandemic and during periods of online learning. We were able to gather data quickly and respond to student feedback as it arose. A core recommendation of the SER was investment in online learning and a new Head of Digital Education was appointed, with a new team of staff put in place, just as the UK went into lockdown in March 2020.
13. For the 2020-21 academic year, Birkbeck took an active decision to be 'online by default – in-person if possible' across all its provision. In the context of most of our students living in family

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<sup>e</sup> Information about universities of sanctuary can be found here: <https://universities.cityofsanctuary.org/>

homes, many being older and/or having disabilities, we felt that this commitment was the right one for our students in order to support their learning during the pandemic. We introduced a flexible teaching model combining synchronous online teaching sessions with high-quality asynchronous digital materials. This was accompanied by a new baseline standard for Birkbeck Moodle and a mandatory cross-College teaching staff development programme, designed and delivered by our digital education team between April and October 2020. The year of online delivery was received positively by students: 80% of 1652 respondents to a start of term survey in 2020-21 agreed that the College had taken an appropriate approach to the challenges presented by the pandemic (11% neutral & 8% disagreed).<sup>8</sup>

14. The learnings from the pandemic have accelerated our ambitions to increase the flexibility of teaching delivery across the College and modes of study. We are committed to providing the choice of either in-person, or online, interactive teaching for all our PGT programmes and to use the same model to facilitate a 'keep up/catch up' offer for our UG students. In October 2022 the OfS awarded Birkbeck a £3 million grant to enable us to invest in HyFlex technology in all our classrooms to support more flexible learning.
15. Birkbeck has been committed to the transformative impact of university teaching for 200 years. Our history is bringing people together, in person and in London. We have all learned through the pandemic that contact can also be digital and this forms part of our approach to making our education accessible for a new generation. As the College enters its third century, we remain a research-led university, offering a broad curriculum which provides "high quality, flexible education through a blend of inspirational face-to-face events and modern digital learning, so that students of all backgrounds can fulfil their ambitions"<sup>9</sup>

## Section 2: Student Experience

16. In this section, we consider the five areas of NSS data, an analysis of performance and further information about learning and teaching developments in the TEF period, informed by the Student Experience Review and supporting our case for excellence in the Birkbeck student experience. It is notable that NSS satisfaction is much lower for London institutions compared to those outside the capital. There are many reasons for this, but cost of living and complexity of travel in the Capital are often cited. Most London institutions are below benchmark on some NSS TEF indicators, and overall median scores amongst London providers for Assessment and Feedback, and Teaching on My Course were 2% lower than the sector as a whole in 2022. London Higher suggested that location should be included as a factor in the benchmarking of the student experience measures in its response to OfS's TEF consultation, however, this was not adopted.<sup>10</sup> For Birkbeck, sample size can also be a problem. Our overall NSS response rate in the TEF period was 62%; the highest number of responses in any one year were 490 FT and 260 PT. While consistent patterns can be found in NSS data, as a small institution with a broad subject base, split indicators fluctuate year-on-year due to small sample sizes.<sup>f</sup>

### NSS Teaching on My Course

17. **Full-time:** Birkbeck is within benchmark with an indicator value of 81.2% (-1.7) and has significantly improved its NSS ranking<sup>9</sup> from 82nd (2019) to 20th (2022) nationally and 12th to 5<sup>th</sup> in London.<sup>11</sup> Nationally, *Staff are good at explaining things* was 18<sup>th</sup> and *Staff have made the subject interesting* 16<sup>th</sup>, in 2022.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>f</sup> The work undertaken to improve NSS scores in specific academic subjects is described in para. 52.

<sup>9</sup> The rankings used in the student experience section are based on internal analysis of the NSS dataset by Birkbeck's Planning Office. The ranking covers multi-faculty institutions only (97 institutions nationally and 22 in London).

18. **Part-time:** Overall Birkbeck is within benchmark with an indicator value of 86.8% (+2.2). Female students, those over 31, Black students, those with a mixed ethnic background, Psychology students and Language students rate teaching materially above benchmark. Our NSS ranking for teaching has been in the top 14 nationally over the TEF period.
19. Following the Student Experience Review, the College has made considerable progress on satisfaction with teaching. In 2018-19, following consultation<sup>12</sup>, we responded to student demand by restructuring our delivery so they can attend classes on fewer but longer evenings, supported by excellent online resources. We have extended three-term learning across all departments so that students can learn at a more even pace across the year. In 2021-22, we completed a cross-college review of the content of our entire portfolio in the context of a new framework for teaching and assessment, which will be launched in the 2023-24 academic year.
20. Underpinning effective teaching, our programmes and modules are designed and developed by departments in line with college design principles (new programme design principles were introduced as part of the portfolio review in 2021-22). The College has well-established procedures for module and programme approval, including local approval by School Education Committees and scrutiny by a college-level Programmes Committee, followed by confirmation through Education Committee and Academic Board. The approval and review process includes external scrutiny as appropriate. The process is managed by a professional quality team supporting senior staff and led by the Assistant Dean for Education in each School. This approval process ensures effective design and content with appropriate assessment and that the curriculum meets with the expectations for quality, formerly through the Quality Code and, now through the OfS quality and standards requirements as well as those of PSRBs.<sup>h</sup> Programme development is accompanied by an annual cycle of monitoring. Departments report on continuation and completion rates, NSS, module evaluation, external examiners' reports, employers (where relevant) and their action plans from the previous year. Our annual quality assessment 2019-2021 report confirmed that academic standards remain strong, and that the College is, in the overview of its external examiners, "providing a stretching education to its students and resisting grade inflation."<sup>13</sup> Since the last TEF, Birkbeck has embedded inclusive learning practice with the introduction of inclusive design guidance and an inclusive curriculum checklist. Module evaluation<sup>i</sup> showed that 79% of respondents in 21/22 agreed that the curriculum included a diverse range of scholars and/or the module considered questions about inclusivity and diversity as part of it, where relevant. Annual quality assessment also addresses attainment gaps between groups of students and work focused on decolonising the curriculum was identified in most departments through our review process.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>h</sup> The Geological Society; The Solicitors Regulation Authority; The Bar Standards Board; CFA Society of the UK; ACCA; CIMA; CIPD; British Psychological Society, Association of Business Psychologists; Royal Society of Biology and British Computer Society.

<sup>i</sup> Since the formal introduction of the *Blue* survey tool three years ago, institutional module evaluation response rates have averaged 24% with a range of between 15% and 42% in departments. We understand from participation in sector groups sharing best practice in engaging the student voice that these response rates are in line with sector norms. Module evaluation references cover modules at levels 4, 5 and 6 unless otherwise stated in the document.

21. Our module evaluation data provides a positive picture of teaching across the College with increasing student satisfaction over the last three years. Responses to module evaluation in the 21/22 academic year showed that 86% of respondents agreed that modules had been intellectually stimulating (+1% on a 5-point scale vs 19/20); 83% of respondents agreed that “all students were encouraged to participate in classroom discussions and to share and exchange ideas” in 2021-22.<sup>14</sup> Our digital education team has been working with academics to explore digital tools to provide students reluctant to contribute in class with an opportunity to engage through other means such as polling software which has proved successful in pilots.<sup>15</sup>
22. Modules and programmes are created and led by active researchers. We offer students a wide range of events and opportunities to hear about and engage with the latest academic and scholarly research (e.g. [Arts Week](#), [Science Week](#)) and the integration of ongoing research into teaching content and practice ensures that students develop an awareness of how research evolves through the constant questioning and testing of its own generally accepted theories. Students engage in collaborative research group work, have opportunities to engage with employers and undertake final year research projects and dissertations across our UG portfolio in all five academic schools. Projects take a variety of formats suitable for different disciplines. Research-led teaching is complemented by specialist teaching delivered by active industry professionals in more vocational and technical provision, ensuring that students are exposed to the latest developments in professional practice as well as acquiring the critical skills required to assess those developments (e.g., Mooting and Trial Skills Module taught by barristers in Law). Schools provide opportunities for students to engage with employers through placement modules (e.g., Industry Placement in Arts) or through exposure to speakers from business (e.g., School of BEI Talks Series). Our new curriculum from 2023-24 aims to embed employability opportunities for all students more consistently across the portfolio, building on good practice in schools and work led by our careers service.

### **Staff Professional Development and Academic Practice**

23. Since TEF 2017, we have introduced flexible career pathways enabling academic staff to gain promotion to professor based on teaching and education criteria as well as the traditional research and teaching pathway. All new staff members are allocated a mentor. All post-probation academic staff are required to participate in academic review which enables staff to reflect on feedback from students and peers, their involvement in design, development, and enhancements in teaching, contribution to college initiatives to improve the student experience and activities to support student continuation and attainment. All probationary academic staff, who do not already have a qualification or Advance HE fellowship are required gain this status. Birkbeck's academic staff are highly qualified: 75% of our 436 academic staff hold a teaching qualification.<sup>16</sup> A quarter of those who do not have a qualification/fellowship joined Birkbeck in the last two years and are working towards this. A further 39% are                      and were experienced teachers before formal training became the norm. Birkbeck provides advice, training, 1:1 feedback, and financial support for all staff to apply for Advance HE Fellowship.
24. Birkbeck introduced an online orientation module for all new teachers in 2021-22 to complement departmental inductions and signpost staff to sources of support, guidance, and opportunities for career development. In addition, an Education Connect SharePoint site directs staff to resources supporting teaching, digital education, standards and quality, inclusive learning and assessment design, decolonising the curriculum, personal tutoring and supporting

and safeguarding students. There is an annual learning and teaching seminar series. A dedicated *Start to teach* course is provided to PhD student teachers who also have full access to our online and in-person support and resources for teaching, and staff have the opportunity to enrol in the University of London PGCE. Teaching excellence is celebrated through the VC's *Awards for Excellence in Learning and Teaching* open to all Birkbeck staff members engaged in teaching and supporting the learning of our students. The categories cover all academic staff, sessional teachers, research students, learning and development tutors, professional service staff and professional support staff working in departments as well as all those working in technical roles who are making a difference to the educational experience. Successful candidates receive an award to enhance their professional development and work with the Education Directorate to share their good practice with the Birkbeck community.

### **NSS Assessment and Feedback**

25. **Full-time:** Birkbeck is below overall benchmark (-4.4), but is improving year on year and within benchmark for year 3 of the time series. Our national NSS ranking has improved over the TEF period rising 41 places from 86<sup>th</sup> (2019) to 45<sup>th</sup> (2022).<sup>11</sup> We are within benchmark for students under 21, students who took a foundation year, disabled students, non-UK students, and those studying History and Archaeology, Politics, Sociology, Social Policy and Anthropology and Psychology.
26. **Part-time:** Birkbeck is below overall benchmark (-6.4), although the time series indicators demonstrate clearly how the College has improved its performance over the TEF period. We perform materially above benchmark for non-UK students and within benchmark for those studying Psychology, English, and History & Archaeology. Our NSS national ranking has risen 12 places from 34<sup>th</sup> (2019) to 22<sup>nd</sup> (2022) and Birkbeck has been in the top three in London over the past three years (1<sup>st</sup> in 2021).<sup>11</sup>
27. Overall module evaluation data shows improved satisfaction between 19/20 and 21/22 in relation to: *The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance* (82.5% +3.6%); *I have received helpful feedback comments on how to perform well in my modules*. (78% + 4.2%) and *feedback on my work has so far been timely* (76.4% + 3.2%).<sup>14</sup> *Marking and assessment has been fair* has not been included in module evaluation to date, but our scores on this in national ranking have improved dramatically from 47<sup>th</sup> in 2019 to 5<sup>th</sup> in 2022.<sup>11</sup>
28. The external examiner is an integral element of the College's quality assurance, monitoring and enhancement of programmes. External examiner comments are considered by programme teams and are reported on in the annual programme quality monitoring processes and internal reviews. Observations and recommendations from external examiners, alongside student feedback, play a key role in the compliance and enhancement of programmes across the College. Birkbeck maintains rigorous academic standards. Our Annual Quality Assessment reporting over the TEF period has confirmed that the standard and quality of assessments remains high. The 2020-21 college-level analysis of reports from external examiners reported that external examiners had highlighted that arrangements for assessments were clear and thorough, and especially commended the approach the College had taken throughout another year impacted by the pandemic. Overall, examiners commented that assessments were effective and efficient with an increased range of assessment types offered by departments. Feedback on assessed work was highlighted as an area of good practice.<sup>17</sup>

29. Our overall improvement in national rankings and module evaluation data, as well as positive feedback from external examiners, reflects the success of the implementation of the Student Experience Review which stimulated innovative work in academic departments to revise their assessment methods and improve the consistency and quality of feedback. The PVC Education launched a programme of good practice sessions in assessment and feedback in 2018 and in 2020 the College introduced new *Inclusive Design Guidance* which emphasises the importance of clear and accessible assessment guidance, providing a range of assessment types, signposting resources in feedback and planning assessment load and deadlines at programme, rather than module level. When we moved assessments online in response to the pandemic in March 2020, we approved a new online and remote assessment policy based on college principles for fair, valid, and robust assessment practice, developed in consultation with Student Leaders. The switch to online and remote assessment was well-received by students and encouraged teaching staff to explore different approaches to formative and summative assessment, supported by our new digital education team.
30. We consulted students about their assessment preferences in January 2021 (3146 responses, response rate of 29%): of these 59% confirmed a preference for online/remote exams: 34% a mixture of online and in-person exams with only 8% preferring all in-person exams.<sup>18</sup> Birkbeck continues to focus on online assessments, but also offers in-person exams where learning outcomes or PSRBs require this. Our diverse student body appreciates the flexibility provided by online exams and our digital education team works with departments to identify the best technologies to support their delivery, submission and marking. The digital education team and our Student Complaints, Conduct and Appeals Office work together to maintain the academic integrity of online assessment.

### **NSS Academic Support**

31. **Full-time:** Birkbeck is below benchmark at 70% (-6.3) but has shown some improvement in its NSS national ranking from 96<sup>th</sup> to 87<sup>th</sup> over the TEF period. Split indicators reveal a fairly consistent pattern across student groups, but we are within benchmark for students who have reported a disability and for those studying History and Archaeology, Media, Journalism and Communications, Sociology, Social Policy and Anthropology and Psychology and students who have taken a foundation year.
32. **Part-time:** Although Birkbeck is below benchmark at 73.8% (-5.6), our ranking improved to 31<sup>st</sup> nationally over the TEF period and we ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> in London in 2022 (2<sup>nd</sup> in 2021). We perform within benchmark for students studying English, Mathematical Sciences and Psychology.
33. Birkbeck has a strong framework of student support delivered both in-person and online. Teaching staff provide essential academic support for students on their modules, and the transformation of our VLE is enhancing the quality and consistency of online academic support as well as information about who to contact with queries about their studies. All students are allocated a personal tutor, although many students prefer and value the additional support they receive before and after class from those who teach them in the evening. This speaks to the dedication of our staff, but also reflects the fact that it is often easier for our working students to access this support than make a separate appointment with a personal tutor. We have sought to address this by embedding the use of MS Teams in our daily working so more personal tutoring activity can now take place virtually. All students benefit from access to specialist



learning development tutors in our academic schools as well as the cross-college learning development team. These teams offer services in two main areas: developing students' academic skillset and supporting them with specialist technology to help them study. Initial skills assessments are available through study skills modules embedded into the curriculum or as part of the college-wide orientation module. Workshops and online resources cover a range of academic practice such as high-level reading and research skills, critical and independent thinking, writing essays, assignments and dissertations, and citation and referencing. At subject-level there has been considerable effort to develop support relevant to disciplines with specialist learning and development tutors delivering subject specific advice and support through sessions embedded into the curriculum, 1:1s, additional workshops and online tailored subject resources. Departments are focused on enhancing the flexibility of their academic support and 10 out of 18 departments improved their NSS Academic Support scores in 2022.<sup>11</sup>

34. Birkbeck students are typically time poor so we have prioritised developing online systems and academic support that they can access 24/7 wherever they are based. Birkbeck has a comprehensive online enquiry system (ASK) to which all student enquiries can be submitted. Enquiries are categorised then assigned to relevant departments before being monitored via a traffic light system to ensure all queries receive a timely response with appropriate advice given. Students can also contact our Student Advice Centre with any questions by phone or email. In 2018, the College introduced *Studiosity*, an online academic service available to students on all UG programmes, providing them with assignment feedback and access to live online tutorials. The *Studiosity* system also enables our cross-college learning development team to identify cases where students are struggling so they can be targeted with 1:1 support. Since its introduction there have been around 6000 submissions to *Studiosity* each year (8961 in the 2020-21 pandemic year). It is always very highly rated by students (e.g. 92% of users rating it 4/5 or better in 2021-22). As most of our students come from widening participation backgrounds and live at home, *Studiosity* provides the kind of support that other students might get from friends/family, or, if campus-based from each other.
35. In November 2022, 82.2%<sup>j</sup> of UG students agreed that teaching staff had been effective in supporting their learning and 78.5% agreed that their department responded to queries in a timely way.<sup>19</sup> Module evaluation for the 2021-22 year demonstrates a similarly positive picture with 77.9% agreeing they had felt well supported in their learning on the module, and 84.7% and 82.8% agreeing they had been able to contact teaching staff and administrative staff when they needed to.<sup>14</sup> We are confident that the NSS scores for Academic Support do not fully reflect the quality and availability of support at Birkbeck. We believe our below benchmark scores may result from the nature of two of the three items that make up the NSS Academic Support scale. These items are: *I have received sufficient advice and guidance in relation to my course* and *Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices on my course*. Over the last two years agreement for FT students with these items has been 69/70% and 63% respectively. Whereas, *I have been able to contact staff when I needed to*, yields higher scores (77% and 78% in 2021 and 2022). The Student Experience Review<sup>7</sup> suggested that the College had an over-supply of programmes and modules in relation to its size, and that while this created a great deal of choice, this choice did not necessarily provide a better experience for students and sometimes led to uncertainty and confusion, particularly among

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<sup>j</sup> Mid-term survey (November 2022) response rate was 23.4% (1104 responses)

time-poor students. It may have also weakened cohort support, particularly in a small institution. Measures have been put in place to provide more administrative support for student module choice and the work we have done restructuring our portfolio, programmes and delivery model should resolve this issue in the longer term. From 2023 our new programmes will have clearer structures, more structured choice of skills/employability and interdisciplinary modules, alongside a greater proportion of core modules bespoke to each programme. Enhancing the consistency and quality of academic support remains a key priority for us and our personal tutoring approach will be subject to further review as we build on emerging good practice identified as part of our new Student Engagement and Success Programme (see para. 91).

### **Supporting Student Wellbeing and Mental Health**

36. During the pandemic, 54% of students reported experiencing psychological distress.<sup>20</sup> With national statistics reporting that one in four people struggled with their mental health, in 2019 the College agreed a whole university approach to mental health with the aim of ensuring that wellbeing was considered at all levels of the College's work and across the whole student population, not just within Wellbeing Services (Counselling, Mental Advisory Service and Disability and Dyslexia Services). The following developments took place as a result: Wellbeing Services developed training for staff on how to support students with mental health difficulties; wellbeing was embedded into online and in-person orientation; the College invested in Togetherall (a self-help and peer support platform allowing all students to access support 24/7); collaborative projects with the Students' Union were run to promote mental health awareness; dedicated wellbeing workshops were run for BAME students. The College developed its own report, response and resources tool to support students to let us know of any difficulties which might be impacting their emotional wellbeing alongside a broader wellbeing social media campaign #atbirkbeckwecan. The Student Advice Service also supports student wellbeing on a practical level, providing crisis support for students who have become homeless, and Camden CAB work onsite one afternoon a week to help students access support in the community.

### **NSS Learning Resources**

37. **Full-time:** Overall Birkbeck is broadly in line with benchmark with an indicator value of 78.2% (-2.7) performing in line with benchmark in years 2 and 3 of the time series, but below benchmark in year 4 despite an increase in our overall indicator value from 70.5% (2021) to 76.7% (2022).

38. **Part-time:** Overall Birkbeck performs within benchmark with an indicator value of 81.3% (-1.2) and was ranked 25<sup>th</sup> nationally in NSS 2022. The year (2021) we performed below benchmark for Learning Resources was also the year in which we obtained our highest NSS rankings for this area (22<sup>nd</sup> nationally and 2<sup>nd</sup> in London). Birkbeck has performed consistently in the top or second quartile in London for Learning Resources for PT students. We perform above benchmark for students studying Mathematical Sciences and Psychology.

39. **Subject split indicators** show that some humanities-based subjects are below benchmark. This is likely to reflect the impact of the pandemic where studies are supported by access to shared spaces and physical resources, archives, libraries, cinema, exhibition space, theatre space, and film equipment. Lockdowns, illness, and school closures would have made

accessing these resources challenging for many of our students. The improvement in NSS scores in this area in 2022 supports this explanation.<sup>11</sup>

40. Birkbeck has undertaken a significant programme of work to improve the quality of its estate and both its physical and virtual learning resources since 2017. Our module evaluation data from 2021-22 shows high satisfaction with resources: 83.6% agreeing that they were able to access the e-books they needed, 83.4% agreeing that learning materials for the module had effectively supported their learning and 80.9% agreeing that the physical environment of the classroom was appropriate for the teaching. Birkbeck performed above NSS sector average in 2021: 81.4% of students agreed that they had been able to access the learning resources they needed for their course during the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>21</sup>

### **Comprehensive Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)**

41. The College has invested significantly in digital education growing the cross-college team from two in 2018-19 to sixteen by 2022. The team provides a strong network of expertise working in partnership with academic schools advising on all aspects of online design and delivery and teaching technology as well as developing the digital capabilities of staff through daily drop-ins, weekly workshops, an annual Digital Education Summit and our *teaching online* module.<sup>15</sup> In the past three years, there has been a transformation in the approach to digital learning and the benefits this offers our students. This extends from our VLE, our support for module development in the digital space, understanding our students' digital capabilities and needs, assessment mechanisms and learning tools. The strength of this work has underpinned our successful application for OfS capital funds to develop HyFlex delivery further.
42. Pre-pandemic, the College prioritised in-person teaching with less focused use of digital resources. The priority for our new digital education team in 2019-20 was to re-design the VLE, Birkbeck Moodle. Students were clear from consultations<sup>12</sup> that having all their learning materials on Moodle was important to them, while staff expressed disappointment about the look, feel and navigation of Moodle as a tool for teaching.<sup>22</sup> Moodle was given a complete redesign and ten standards were introduced for the start of the 2020-21 year, supported by clear guiding principles. We designed a four-week module development programme and created a course design tool through which staff could use simple and effective principles to think through how the module would be taught and design it by week before exporting it to Moodle. The course design used Laurillard's six learning types allowing teachers to consider what combination of activities and materials would work best for their teaching.<sup>23</sup>
43. We conducted an audit of students' digital skills in summer 2020. We used the findings to develop *prepare to learn* online material for our orientation module and we established an access to digital learning fund to ensure that all students could access the IT resources they required to engage with their studies. We ensure that programmes are fully accessible in Moodle (Sensus Access, Recite Me tool bar, and, Verbit captioning service) and have recently purchased the Brickfield Accessibility Toolkit for Moodle which teaching staff can use to obtain detailed accessibility reports on their Moodle content and easy ways to resolve any issues.
44. Feedback on the VLE from teaching staff, students and external examiners has been extremely positive over the last three years. Our Annual Quality Assessment 2019-21 overview report noted that the value of Moodle resources and the work of the digital education team were

distinctive features of reports across the college.<sup>13</sup> External examiners commended practice they considered not merely compliant but exceptional in several subject areas. External examiners reported on the purposeful and thoughtful approach taken to the redesign of modules resulting in more visually appealing and engaging sites and greater consistency across modules. Excellent approaches to hybrid pedagogies blending well-structured asynchronous materials with synchronous sessions were also commended by external examiners with an acknowledgement of the amount of effort put in by teaching staff to make learning materials accessible and ensure they appealed to different kinds of students.<sup>17</sup> In our most recent mid-term survey, 83.9% of UG students agreed it was easy to find resources in Moodle and 81.4% agreed it was easy to use the range of technology required by their programme of study.<sup>19</sup>

## **Birkbeck Library**

45. Birkbeck's NSS national ranking for *Library resources have supported my learning well* has risen from 89<sup>th</sup> in 2020 to 59<sup>th</sup> in 2022 for FT students. Birkbeck Library was refurbished in 2019 to provide a combination of spaces to meet different study needs, created in response to student feedback. Computers and facilities for printing, scanning, and copying are also available. Birkbeck Library provides specialist study spaces for disabled and dyslexic students and the Disability and Dyslexia Service is located there to help students access library materials in a format to suit their individual needs. A staffed service is provided from 9.00am to midnight, and the library is contactable via the online helpdesk service, via live chat, email, or phone seven days a week. Students can access the joint access schemes between academic libraries nationally and Bloomsbury contains one of the world's greatest concentrations of libraries, most of which students can access, for reference services and borrowing. The library runs in-person training, and a virtual study module shows students how to make the most of the library with support to develop their information skills. Each academic subject area has a dedicated subject librarian and a subject-specific library guide to ensure students can access specialist help tailored to their needs. Subject librarians provide 1:1, group and bitesize sessions, both in-person and online. We have invested substantially in a digital collection – e-books, databases and e-journals as well as digitised readings for course reading lists – which is available to students remotely 24/7, with over 200,000 new e-book titles added to the catalogue since 2020. There is a click-and-post service to have books sent to students' homes. Overall student satisfaction with the library is good, 90.2% (library survey: 345 respondents) of respondents were satisfied with its services in 2021.<sup>24</sup> Birkbeck Library established a Student–Library Partnership Forum in 2017 to gain a deeper understanding of current student needs and students are encouraged to make practical suggestions about library services. The quality of our library service won the Customer Service Excellence Standard in October 2021.<sup>25</sup>

## **NSS Student Voice**

46. **Full-time:** Birkbeck is below benchmark with an indicator value of 65.9% (-5.1), however despite this our national NSS ranking for Student Voice has improved from 92<sup>nd</sup> in 2019 to 51<sup>st</sup> in 2022 and from 18<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> in London.
47. **Part-time:** Birkbeck performs materially above the PT benchmark with an indicator value of 68.1% (+5.7). NSS national ranking has also increased from 42<sup>nd</sup> in 2019 to 24<sup>th</sup> in 2022 (10<sup>th</sup> in 2021), and from 9<sup>th</sup> in 2019 to 4<sup>th</sup> in London in 2022 (3<sup>rd</sup> in 2021). Psychology performs particularly highly at 17.6% above its PT benchmark.

48. The difference between our PT and FT performance against benchmarks on Student Voice is stark and can be seen clearly on the TEF dashboard. We offer exactly the same opportunities and facilitate the same mechanisms for both FT and PT students. On the overall data there is a 2.2% difference in the indicator values of our PT and FT students but an 8.6% difference in benchmark. These data reflect a key issue for Birkbeck, which is that all our students have lives more similar to typical part-time students than typical full-time ones. Student Voice in the College is materially above benchmark for those whose programmes last four years, but below for those whose programmes last three years, despite both groups being in the same institution, with the same opportunities and taught at the same time in the same classroom.
49. Birkbeck performs very well on two out of the three sub-set of questions relating to Student Voice: *I have the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course* – FT 77%, PT 79% and *Staff value students' views and opinions about the course* - FT 69%, PT 71%, in 2022. Students can provide feedback on their experiences at Birkbeck through end of term module evaluation, end of year satisfaction surveys, library survey and student-staff liaison meetings. Using our *Blue* system, reports are sent to students after every survey summarising the results and outlining the steps we will take in response. This does not seem to be reflected in scores on *It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on*. We will be consulting with students in 2023 about how to improve both module evaluation response rates and our communication to them about actions that have been taken as a result of feedback.
50. Student course representatives are an important link between the student body, the College and the Students' Union. Birkbeck's elected Student Leaders are members of the institutional-level Education Committee. There is an election process for course reps, but the SU often finds it difficult to find people to stand for election and fulfil duties as a course rep. The SU provides training and support and liaises with academic departments and professional services to ensure that representatives contribute as fully as possible. Senior members of academic and professional services staff hold regular meetings with SU leaders and staff.
51. Birkbeck's Students' Union has the challenge of representing a more diverse set of students with a smaller team of part-time officers than most SUs. They have two part-time 'student leaders', rather than a full-time team of sabbatical officers. In our most recent mid-term survey in November 2022, 96% of UG students were aware that Birkbeck had a SU, but only 24% considered that the SU start of term activities were relevant to them and only 20% had taken part in these. Only 23% agreed that the SU welcome fair was useful to them. Generally, SU representation and activity is focused around our younger students. One of our Student Leaders is preparing the student submission with additional resources provided to support it. We have had regular meetings with the Student Leader and SU staff. The student submission was shared with us for the first time at midnight on 23<sup>rd</sup> January 2023.

### **Subject Split Experience Indicators**

52. Some of the disciplinary areas within the College follow the same pattern as the overall indicators. Some subjects/departments have performed poorly over the TEF period and work has been done to address this. Computing has undergone an external review, as a consequence it now has a new leadership team, they have recently reported on changes and enhancements to improve academic support.<sup>26</sup> Computing external examiners have reported that assessments are of good quality and feedback is now 'impressive' with a written

observation from an external examiner in the 2020-21 year that this had improved significantly.<sup>27</sup> Computing has improved its Student Voice scores year on year from 58% (2019) to 68% (2022). An entirely new curriculum will be launched in 2023-24. Biosciences have already revised all programmes of study, the first cohort will graduate in 2022-23, its department annual monitoring report<sup>26</sup> and module evaluation scores<sup>14</sup> showed very strong improvement in student satisfaction.<sup>k</sup> Business and Management reviewed all aspects of the student experience. The design and mixture of summative and formative assessments across many modules were commended in 2020-21 as 'impressive practice' by the external examiner, with the use of the VLE to provide logical direction and clear and consistent assessment guidelines to students praised.<sup>27</sup> Management has now embedded a *personal and academic skills* module into its UG degrees. Geography has reviewed its UG portfolio and restructured its teaching into teams so that students engage with a wider range of academic staff and subjects for core modules, facilitating transition to optional modules.<sup>26</sup> Geography's NSS scores improved across all NSS themes in 2022. Student Voice has improved from 64% (2019) to 73% (2022), NSS Academic Support has improved from 60% to 73%.<sup>11</sup>

### Section 3: Student Outcomes

53. Birkbeck offers opportunities for university-level study to all who seek it. Our admissions processes evaluate the potential of each student to benefit from higher education on the basis of contextual information rather than prior qualifications. This approach and the average age of our student body means that there will always be people who do not complete their studies or take a long time to do so. In the case of school leavers, most parents do all that they can to support their children practically and financially through university study. Most of our students are not school leavers or are not the 'typical' school leaver and most balance studying alongside work and family. When our students take time out from their degrees, or fail to complete them, work, health, family and finances are invariably the reasons for this.
54. We have evidence that students do not complete for a variety of reasons, none of which are linked to the excellence of our education and the overall quality of provision. An exit survey of students who left without an award<sup>l</sup> illustrates this.<sup>28</sup> Respondents were asked to rate their agreement with a list of statements relating to possible reasons why they had not completed their studies. While 21% agreed that they were getting low marks/failing exams and 44% agreed they were not enjoying their course, other personal factors were also highly rated. Pressure from their job making it difficult to find time to study was agreed by 40%, 18% stated that a member of their family was suffering from ill health, 37% cited financial difficulty, 48% of respondents agreed that their own mental health difficulties were a factor and 21% that physical health was a factor. Forty-three percent reported satisfaction with their Birkbeck experience, a further 24% were neutral and 34% stated that they were dissatisfied. This is good evidence that life-events are a strong contributor to students' decisions when terminating their studies. We try to do all we can to support our students, but there are circumstances in which it is just not possible for them to continue with their studies. Some quotes from the survey include: "The teachers were fantastic and course content very interesting. It was just too difficult working full-time and living in such an expensive city having to prioritize work over studying. However, it was definitely useful to me as it crystallized my desire to study and

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<sup>k</sup> In 2021-22, *I have felt supported on my learning on this module* had 85% agreement and *The module was intellectually stimulating* had 93% (Level 4 and 5 modules).

<sup>l</sup> Sample of 790 students who terminated their studies without an award in the last 3 years; 154 respondents (19.5%).

showed me I was capable of university and Birkbeck reached out and offered me lots of support.” and “I didn’t understand my mental health at the time and I wasn’t in a position to take on advice and wasn’t able to help myself or let myself be helped. I’m sorry, to you and myself, Birkbeck continues to be a unique and strong institution that I wish all the best to.”

### **TEF Benchmarking, Metrics and the Data Dashboard**

55. Benchmarking can be problematic for Birkbeck: full-time benchmarks include students with similar characteristics to ours who, in most other providers, will study in the daytime in an immersive manner alongside school leavers. Birkbeck students study solely in the evening alongside students like themselves, largely because they have to continue with their daytime responsibilities. These responsibilities require a more flexible approach to study. Students often interrupt for one or two years, and/or change mode of study, before they complete their degree.
56. TEF indicator metrics for continuation and completion are taken at fixed points after year of entry and fixed at mode of entry. Many of our students change mode (up to 15% in a year move from FT to PT) and/or take more than one year out of study. Using the individualised data from the OfS, later in this submission we will show that by looking a further two years ahead, our TEF indicator metrics are better than those in the TEF dashboard.
57. During this TEF period all of the students who contributed to the FT completion metrics, and two out of four years that contributed to our FT continuation metric, would have been unable to access maintenance loans if they opted for part-time study. They were therefore more likely to enrol for FT study despite the weight of other commitments. The introduction of maintenance loans for PT students from 2018 allowed more of our students to study at a pace consistent with their other commitments.
58. The TEF dashboard for part-time student indicators combines three distinct groups of students:
1. Those enrolled on UG degree programmes (30% of those in continuation metric),
  2. Those enrolled on named Certificates of Higher Education and Foundation Degrees (25%)
  3. Those enrolled on flexible ‘pay as you go’ modular open access Certificate of Higher Education (45%).

The open access Certificate of Higher Education (3) does not have a defined length of study, nor any expected pattern of study. Students self-enrol on a module-by-module basis as and when they choose, eventually gaining 120 credits to be awarded a Certificate of Higher Education in Combined Studies. This provision is often undertaken by students returning to study after many years without the confidence or lifestyle to commit to a defined pattern of study. It is an important part of the Birkbeck mission to build academic confidence in such students. Measuring continuation and completion at fixed points, as the TEF methodology does, is not appropriate for this programme. Analysis of those on named Certificate and foundation degree programmes (2) shows that both continuation and completion metrics are materially above benchmark: 69.6% for continuation (benchmark 56.9%); and 61.6% for completion (benchmark 48.0%). As demonstrated above, the inclusion of the group of students on the open-access modular Certificate in the overall dashboard for part-time students is not appropriate and makes the ‘overall’ data appear below benchmark even when this group of students would not have been expected to continue, complete or progress within the fixed time period of the TEF. We have reported the data for part-time degree students only and have detailed the outcomes for the split metrics for this group by accessing the individualised files.

Our split metrics for FT students on the TEF dashboard also includes 'other UG students', but these represent a total of 130 against 4170 so are unlikely to make substantial difference to the split metric outcomes.<sup>4</sup>

### **Student Outcome Measures: Overall indicators**

59. The TEF data dashboard shows that, overall, Birkbeck is within benchmark for continuation and progression of full-time students. It is above benchmark for continuation of part-time first-degree students' and in line with benchmark for completion. The College is below benchmark for FT completion and PT first degree student progression. In all cases Birkbeck's actual performance is better than the TEF data dashboard shows. This is because many of our students switch mode or take more than one year out of their degree study period. We provide detail below.

#### **Full-time Continuation**

60. Birkbeck is within benchmark with an indicator value of 85% (-0.6), the time series data show a drop to below benchmark in year 4. This is because our 19-20 entrants started with us in the first year of the pandemic, and many of those particularly impacted by Covid-19, broke their studies for 2020-21 and were deemed 'inactive'. However, 18% of those flagged as non-continuing in 2020/21 returned to Birkbeck in 2021-22 (39 out of 212 students).<sup>1</sup> Factoring these students into the indicator for 2019/20 FT UG continuation, Birkbeck is performing broadly in line with the benchmark for year 4, as well as overall.

61. The spirit of the continuation metric is to measure drop-out rate. However, measuring whether students are active or not at one specific point following their first year, does not reflect the whole story. Students like ours need flexibility, and many who the metric deems to have 'not continued' do in fact return to active study after this specific point. We show that by looking further ahead, our performance in continuation is actually much better than the dashboard suggests as substantial proportions of those categorised as inactive in their second year, return to study in subsequent years following an interruption. If the TEF continuation metrics included subsequent years, our continuation metrics would be 2016 (year 2) – 88.6%; 2017 (year 3) – 90.0%; 2018 (year 4) – 88.1%. All of these are materially above benchmark.<sup>4</sup>

62. Continuation rates on our relatively new Foundation Year (FY) are 84.5%, materially above the benchmark of 80.5. Our FY continuation rates are better still, as around ten percent of our FY students go on to study at degree-level elsewhere. While this is not reflected positively in our TEF metrics, we regard this as a positive outcome. Our FY students study here in the evening whilst working and gain the appetite and confidence to study in a more immersive way in the daytime.

#### **Part-time UG Degree Continuation**

63. For those registered for a degree, Birkbeck is materially above benchmark with an indicator value of 71.4% (+ 8.8). Stronger performance can be seen in English (78%), History & Archaeology (82%), Languages, Psychology, Economics all at 75%. Students in Low IMD groups (Q 1 or 2) have continuation of 68% against a 61% benchmark.



### **Full-time Completion**

64. Overall Birkbeck is below benchmark with an indicator value of 70.3% (-9.8), however, performance has improved by 8.5% over the TEF period. The implementation of our Student Experience Review is, we believe, supporting this improvement and our future plans will continue the positive impact. Birkbeck's FT completion metrics are in fact better than the data in the TEF dashboard indicate. Again, this relates to the timescale for the metrics and our students' study patterns and unavoidable interruptions.
65. In the TEF completion metrics 300 students from the 2013-14 cohort were identified as inactive (having not previously qualified) in their fourth year. However, 65 of these students subsequently gained their degree bringing the indicator value up to 72% for 2013/14. Using the same criteria this is 74% for the 2014/15 cohort. Data for 2015-16 entrants is not yet available but, based on internal data we estimate it will be approximately 76%. While not at FT benchmark, these completion rates are now above B3 threshold and well above the benchmark for PT students (60.1%). Up to 15% of our students switch from full-time to part-time but continue to be categorised as FT in TEF metrics.<sup>4</sup>
66. We are striving to, and succeeding in, improving completion rates, but the benchmarks are set in the context of other FT providers who require students to engage in daytime teaching where these students are likely to have fewer competing responsibilities. Benchmarking does not consider students' dependents, caring responsibilities, or work status, and these are key issues for our students in relation to their capacity to continue with study (see para. 54).

### **Part-time UG Degree Completion**

67. For those registered for a degree, Birkbeck is within benchmark with an indicator value of 58.5% (-1.7) and has made significant improvements to its part-time completion rates over four years.

### **Full-time Progression**

68. Overall, Birkbeck is within benchmark with an indicator value of 65.9% (-0.5). Our performance is somewhat better than that shown in the dashboard as we have disproportionately higher 'significant interim study' than the sector (3% vs 1.5%). These are students who have already completed more FT study at the time of the census but have not yet gone on to employment (as it will be a matter of just weeks since they finished). Overall, in the TEF period 4% of students are in this category which would make our overall indicator materially above benchmark at 70.1% (benchmark of 66.4%).
69. Success in progression is also reflected in the Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) data from HMRC.<sup>29</sup> Birkbeck students perform consistently well on this measure with some of the highest salaries in the UK (9<sup>th</sup> in 2019, 11<sup>th</sup> in 2020). Most recent (2021) data show Birkbeck's average graduate salary is 8<sup>th</sup> highest of London multi-faculty HEIs one year after graduation, and 7<sup>th</sup> highest average three years after graduating.

### **Part-time UG Degree Progression**

70. For those registered for a degree, Birkbeck is below benchmark with an indicator value of 71.5 (-10.1). This value is well above the FT benchmark and above B3 thresholds. The sector has expressed concern that the national B3 threshold for PT progression is higher than that for FT

students. It is highly unlikely that people who study PT are able to progress to high-level occupations more easily. Many Birkbeck students study PT because of personal constraints preventing FT study. These are the same constraints that will prevent them from working FT and there is considerable evidence that it is difficult to find 'high quality' part-time work (Lyonette, 2010; Warren & Lyonette 2020).<sup>30</sup> Given that OU students make up 60% of the benchmark here, we believe that both the national threshold and Birkbeck's benchmarks must be driven by a group of PT students who are already in higher-level jobs and were studying PT to get qualifications consistent with their existing status.

71. Of the 182 PT degree graduates that are counted negatively in our progression metrics, the majority (68%) are in work (albeit in non-professional roles), half of these are in administrative roles and a further 21% have undertaken interim study.<sup>4</sup> Significant interim study is 1% higher than the sector average showing that our outcomes are better than the TEF metrics indicate. Given the age profile of our graduates it is likely that many of them also have caring responsibilities, but select their work (non-graduate work), rather than caring, as their main activity in their response, which counts negatively in terms of metrics.
72. Heidi data on salaries shows that 58% of Birkbeck's 2018-19 PT UGD graduates who reported their salary were earning £30k+ which can be compared to 51% of London PT UGD graduates. The 2019-20 figures are 68% for Birkbeck graduates compared with 58% of London PT UGD graduates.<sup>2</sup>

### Full-time Split Indicators

73. Our split metrics generally follow the pattern of our overall indicators, however, we explore the exceptions below.
74. **Continuation.** Birkbeck's degrees with foundation-year, students over 31, business and managements students and computing students all have continuation rates materially above benchmark. Students in Languages, Media, Journalism and Communication, Philosophy and Religious Studies, and Economics are shown to be below overall benchmark for continuation, but with lower statistical certainty. These are small cohorts and time series for the subject areas shows fluctuation above and below the benchmark. ABCS continuation is below benchmark for Q4/5 students, and similarly for those eligible for free school meals. We are unable to do further analysis on these groups as the individualised files do not contain students' ABCS quintiles. These groups are smaller and there is less statistical certainty in the data. The pattern is not repeated for IMD where all quintiles are robustly in line with benchmark.
75. **Completion.** As stated above although Birkbeck is shown to be performing below benchmark for FT UG degree completion, there has been an 8.5% improvement in performance over the four-year TEF period. Subject areas vary in their distance from the benchmark and in some contexts the numbers are quite small. In areas where there is considerable distance (computing, media, journalism and communications, history and archaeology) there have been substantive changes to programme structure and academic support in these departments in order to improve outcomes for students. We examined split metrics to identify any groups which may be further from benchmark than others. The ethnicity split metrics show that some ethnic groups are further from benchmark than others. In line with the case made in paras 64-66, Table 1 shows data on completion status two years after the TEF year-4 metric and

indicates that all groups move closer to, or above, benchmark whilst the difference in the gap from the benchmark between Black and White student completion is reduced.<sup>m</sup> These year-6 figures bring Birkbeck within benchmark for the year 1 cohort and above it for the year 3 cohort when the denominator is UK-students only.

**Table 1. FT Degree Completion by ethnicity measured at year 6 <sup>4</sup>**

Ethnicity	Overall OfS Indicator at Year 4	Benchmark	Year 1 2013 cohort at year 6	Year 2 2014 cohort at year 6	Year 3 2015 cohort projected using internal data
White	75.4%	81.9%	77.6%	73.4%	81.8%
Black	61.7%	75.7%	76.0%	68.0%	82.3%
Asian	73.1%	81.4%	86.9%	75.2%	90.5%
Mixed	67.8%	76.6%	77.1%	70.8%	78.8%
Other	70.3%	79.3%	75.9%	82.6%	89.5%
All	71.1%	80.6%	78.2%	72.8%	82.7%

76. **Progression.** Overall Birkbeck is within benchmark for progression. Whilst most split metrics follow this pattern, sociology students are materially above benchmark and there are a small number of split metrics which do not meet benchmark. Media, journalism and communications, philosophy and religious studies and geography are below benchmark overall, but performance in the period varies and meets benchmark in some years. These subjects are represented by small numbers of students (31, 29, 27 students respectively over the four-year period) and disabled students are disproportionately represented in these groups. "Other ethnicity" is also below benchmark, but again this data is unreliable (8 students in 2017, 31 in 2018 and 6 in 2019).

77. In relation to ABCS quintiles, Q1 is flagged as below benchmark. Individualised files do not give details of students' ABCS quintiles so further analysis on why Q1 does less well is not possible. None of the split metrics which make up some of the ABCS characteristics show below benchmark performance, so it may be related to entry qualification not being included in the split metrics.

### Part-time Split Indicators

78. **Continuation:** As stated in para. 58, the TEF metrics for part-time on the OfS dashboard included Other UG and we have examined the 'PT UG degree' separately in terms of split metrics. All of our split metrics for part-time degree student continuation are above benchmark, in many cases significantly higher (e.g. Psychology is 75% v benchmark of 59%, those with a disability 71% v benchmark of 62%).<sup>4</sup>

79. **Completion.** The TEF metrics for part-time on the OfS dashboard include Other UG and we have therefore examined the 'PT UG degree' separately in terms of split metrics. This shows that most of the split indicators are broadly in line with benchmark for completion, with overall completion rates showing year-on-year improvement as seen in Table 1. While Law, Psychology and Languages all perform materially above benchmark for completion, and split metrics for ethnicity and IMD again are all broadly within benchmark, there are a small number

<sup>m</sup> Data are different from overall completion data because OfS ethnicity data are presented only for UK students.

of subjects where we are more than 5% from benchmark: Computing, Business and Philosophy. Philosophy has very low student numbers, and the most recent cohort in the individualised files show an 81% completion rate. Similarly Computing has improved to 68%, and Business to 65%.<sup>4</sup>

80. **Progression.** The benchmark for PT progression to graduate level activity is high. Analysis of the individualised files shows several split metrics below benchmark. In the case of Sociology and Politics, the student numbers are low (fewer than 30 students over 4 years) and the data is therefore unreliable; some years are in line with or exceed benchmark. For History (49 students over 4 years) there is strong variation from year to year and a disproportionate number of students over 51. For Psychology (120 students over 4 years) of those flagged with a negative outcome on the census date have significant interim study and this would bring us above benchmark. For Business and Management (120 students over 4 years) the most recent year is above benchmark, similar to Psychology, where of those who were deemed negative had significant interim study and this would bring us broadly in line with benchmark.<sup>4</sup>
81. Most ethnic groups are within 5% of benchmark, except Asian students who are 10% below (46 students in total). We have compared the students who are in the metrics in non-professional employment to their responses given in our enrolment survey in the latest year they enrolled ). Although numbers are low, when asked why they studied PT rather than FT, responded that they could not afford to give up work, and a that they had caring responsibilities. In the case of those with caring responsibilities at least, it is likely that these prevented them entering employment deemed 'professional level'.<sup>4</sup>

## Career Development

82. Birkbeck's Careers and Enterprise service provides support both online and in-person for students at all stages of their career, be it entry level, mid-career, career changers and senior executives. This is done through skills sessions, employer-led career insight events, CV reviews, mock interviews, digital-skills training, on-line courses, coaching, entrepreneurial support and networking. Since the last TEF, the Careers Service identified that students wanted more direct engagement with employers as well as practical experience. The team introduced micro-placements (including part-time, flexible roles and both entry and higher-level roles) and have placed students with 65 different employers. Students with an interest in entrepreneurship are supported in starting a business through the Pioneer Programme. This is led by small business owners and had 160 participants in 2021, 92% of whom have either started a business or intended to start one in the future; 100% of participants reported that they would recommend the programme. In 2021, Birkbeck's School of Business, Economics and Informatics achieved Small Business Chartership status with particular recognition for its extracurricular enterprise initiatives with the assessors observing that: "The value Birkbeck adds to their student business owners and the impact on their businesses is an order of magnitude higher than the assessors have seen elsewhere."<sup>31</sup>
83. In 2017 Birkbeck Careers developed a series of bespoke employer talks and placements called the Ability Programme (2019 THE award runner-up) to address feedback from disabled students who wanted to develop confidence in identifying skills and securing employment as well as securing reasonable adjustments in the workplace. This programme is promoted to the whole student body (so that students who have not disclosed a disability can engage with it),

131 UG students participated in 2021-22.<sup>n</sup> The Head of Talent at the Telegraph said: “What’s brilliant about this programme is that you get a very diverse perspective, and it challenges your way of thinking and how you do things. (The placement student) was incredibly creative and innovative and worked on three projects that will continue to have a huge impact on our work.” We conducted further research into the career-aspirations of disabled students in 2020 and are now embedding the findings from this into our accredited careers provision.

84. Birkbeck Careers is also working in collaboration with academic staff and employers to develop credit-bearing careers and micro-placement modules, which will be embedded into the new academic portfolio from 2023-24. We have an internal Careers Advisory Board comprised of academic staff who are also industry experts and can advise on the content, delivery, and assessment of the modules. In addition, we have an Employer Panel<sup>o</sup> made up of around 15 employers across industries who help to ensure that module content is commercially relevant, current, and valuable to students entering today’s job market.

### Educational Gain

85. Birkbeck’s conception of educational gain is the benefit received by those who have been excluded from traditional study owing to personal, financial or social circumstances. Engagement with higher education does not necessarily mean being educated to degree level, it may involve joining an academic community and engaging in some modular study at level 4. Success in higher education for traditionally-excluded groups may mean a third-class degree worked for over six or seven years. The distance travelled to achieve this is enormous and the transformational nature of this kind of educational gain is something our students, and our academics celebrate. Educational gain in this context may not fit with the time-constraints and achievement levels that might be expected when educating school leavers. It matters to individuals, communities and society, and, it makes a difference. [A selection of BBK graduate case studies can be found here](#). Quotes include: “I’ve struggled with education because

...Some of my teachers told me to give up while I could, to just accept that I probably wouldn’t be able to handle further education... It was someone from the admissions team of a different university who put me onto Birkbeck. They explained it was a unique university, which lets people work or parent during the day ( ).... My lecturers helped me in every way they could to make sure I didn’t fall behind, and the Disability Support and Study Skills services for students at Birkbeck were excellent. My time at Birkbeck... taught me that I’m capable of much more than I ever imagined.” ( ) and: “When I look at my former self... I’m like no, well done kid... I didn’t do too well in my GCSEs... I went straight into the workforce and... I thought to myself this might be a good time to get into a degree programme... I obviously kept my FT job because it was good to have money in your pocket...I want to put my mark on the world.” ( ).<sup>32</sup>

86. Over the TEF period, only 16.7% of our FT and 6.3% of our PT students held A levels equivalent to CDD or higher, 16% of FT and 24% of PT students had no entry qualifications

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<sup>n</sup> E.g., Reed Smith, Advantage Smollan, CDM, Azure, Vice News, BDO, Enterprise, Kaleidoscope Group, DWP, Peoplewise, Barclays and Disability Action Haringey.

<sup>o</sup> E.g., OnPoint Accounting, SL Mercury Partners, Clu, CRC Cyber Resource Centre, Bafta, Tradedoubler, BMS (Bristol Myers Squibb), Reed Smith, Travel Counsellors, Wildflowers of London, Student Circus, Handshake and 10000 Black Interns.



and 40% of FT and 20% of PT came through an access or foundation year route. In the context of our admissions policies, we can demonstrate strong evidence of actual learning gain across the student body. 58% of Birkbeck's part-time degree students coming in with a level 2 qualification or lower go on to achieve a first class or upper second-class degree, the average for the sector is 55%. This is at an institution whose external examiners consistently note the rigour and high standards of awards (para. 28).

**Table 2.<sup>2</sup> Sector comparison of the % of graduates in 2017-18 to 20-21 who were entrants with a level 2 qualification or lower.**

Graduate Groups	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
<b>Birkbeck FT UG entrants L2/ lower</b>	15%	18%	17%	11%
<b>Sector FT UG</b>	3%	3%	4%	6%
<b>Birkbeck PT UG entrants L2/ lower</b>	19%	21%	18%	15%
<b>Sector PT UG</b>	15%	16%	19%	22%
<b>Sector PT UG excluding OU</b>	10%	10%	13%	15%

87. Birkbeck's qualifiers over the last four years include a higher percentage of students who entered Birkbeck with a level 2 qualification or lower compared with the sector, but the percentage of qualifiers who gained a 1st, 2:1 or 2:2 over the last four years is above the HE-sector average in three/four of the last five years.

**Table 3.<sup>2</sup> Percentage of students with no level 3 qualifications gaining second class degree or higher.**

All modes	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
<b>Birkbeck gain 1<sup>st</sup>/2:1/2:2</b>	95%	85%	95%	92%
<b>Sector gain 1<sup>st</sup>/2:1/2:2</b>	85%	88%	92%	92%
<b>Difference against sector</b>	+ 10%	-3%	+3%	=

Part time only	2017/18	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21
<b>Birkbeck gain 1<sup>st</sup>/2:1/2:2</b>	94%	88%	96%	87%
<b>Sector gain 1<sup>st</sup>/2:1/2:2</b>	75%	78%	81%	88%
<b>Difference against sector</b>	+ 19%	+10%	+15%	-1%

### Approaches to Supporting Education Gain in the Birkbeck context

88. Our approach to supporting educational gain is core to our identity as a widening participation institution and communicated clearly to students through our prospectus, promotional material, and course information. We provide our students with solid foundation-level skills and a clear vision about how a degree can increase their social capital and enhance their career aspirations. Key to supporting non-traditional students is preparedness for higher level study and Birkbeck does this in a number of ways. Where appropriate, we strongly encourage students to enrol on our Foundation Year (FY) so that they can begin their degree-level studies on a strong footing. We launched this cross-College provision in 2017. It has proved successful with student numbers growing from 162 in 2017/18 to 981 in 2022. UG programmes across all academic schools are accessible via the FY. The 120 credit-year comprises subject-specific and skills-related modules. The objectives of these modules are communicated to students at the beginning of the programme and cover understanding of, and reflecting on, knowledge of a

topic of relevance to their area of study, engaging effectively with different kinds of learning format (e.g. lecture, seminar, workshop), and the nature of university-level study, its requirements and the skills the student needs to succeed. Our FY modules provide safe spaces where students can learn in a supportive learning environment away from their disciplinary homes. Tutors are recruited based on their abilities to work with and inspire non-traditional students at Level 3. Both NSS and outcomes indicators for students who have taken a FY are all within benchmark, demonstrating that this provision offers a strong basis from which students can start their UGD studies and achieve educational gain.

89. Birkbeck provides a pre-session programme of study skills workshops called *Get Ahead, Stay Ahead*. In September 2022, we ran 36 workshops on weekday lunchtimes and evenings and twice on Saturday mornings (overall attendance of 1796 average, satisfaction 4.8 out of 5)<sup>33</sup>. All sessions are recorded and available for students to follow online if they are unable to attend in-person. In addition, our access and engagement team provide an 'On track' programme to those who have been out of education for some time to explain the services and support available at Birkbeck. Academic skills provision is critical to the support of our students. The central learning development team provide an online study skills module and regular workshops throughout the academic year, working in close cooperation with a network of learning development tutors in academic schools who provide more specialist subject support. The central team offer over 200 workshops with around 6000 attendances each year, these workshops are highly rated, with an average of 4.6 on a scale of 1-5.<sup>33</sup> Working through the pandemic revealed that our students find it easier to access study-skills provision online (due to time constraints and cost of travel) and so we offer a mix of both online and in-person provision. In 2017 we introduced a *Breaking Barriers Kit*, a service offering students ways to adapt their studies and study habits to suit their learning needs. The kit is primarily targeted at neurodivergent and disabled students but aims to be inclusive and is open to all students. Students attend a workshop which can be followed by a 1:1 with a learning development tutor. This supports awareness of our initial dyslexia screening software in Birkbeck Library. Through engaging with the kit, students gain an enhanced understanding of a particular study skill (e.g. academic reading, any aspect of the assignment writing process or exam preparation) along with knowledge and experience of software available to support them. Academic support is also described in para 33.
90. Following the Student Experience Review and the creation of a revised Access and Participation Plan in 2019-20, the PVC Education initiated and led a project identifying the factors underlying academic success at Birkbeck in order to help us understand differences between groups in academic performance.<sup>34</sup> This was primarily to examine awarding gaps between ethnic groups but had additional focus on other student characteristics. A range of inter-related causes for student demotivation and decreased performance were identified. These included psychological factors such as stereotype threat and self-esteem but also underdeveloped literacy, numeracy and study skills as well as challenges of personal commitments, prioritising commitments and time management issues as well as the need for role models and understanding how to navigate an academic institution. In response to this research, we have created an implementation plan to address the awarding gap at Birkbeck<sup>34</sup> which complements work already underway across the college. The gap in attainment between our Black and White students was 31% in 2017/18, but reduced to 21% in 2020/21.<sup>35</sup>

## **Student Engagement and Success Programme**

91. The findings from the research described above<sup>34</sup> formed the basis of a successful bid to the JP Morgan Chase Foundation for funding of a new student success programme. This will deliver a personalised development approach to working with UG students from the outset of their studies. Birkbeck is establishing a cross-college student success team, dedicated to understanding, developing, and implementing innovative new ways to improve student success and address the awarding gap. This team will work in close collaboration with the Assistant Deans for Education and central and subject-based learning and development staff from 2023-24. The programme will examine and address the barriers faced by UG students in successfully completing their degrees with a particular focus on those from underrepresented backgrounds and at particular risk of dropping out or underperforming. The aim is to ensure that students have a clear understanding of their skills and abilities at the outset of their degree. The programme will bring together remote and in-person activities, including student outreach, group-based learning enhancement and tailored interventions for those most at risk. Learner analytics will be used to identify students who need individual support. Programme content will cover core academic skills, confidence building, life, and study skills, mentoring and coaching. We aim to create stronger peer support cohorts and development plans for each student. This programme will be used to inform UG teaching, learning and assessment design across the College, as well as wider academic support and staff development strategies. The project began at the start of the 2022-23 academic year with the appointment of a new Student Engagement and Success Lead; further appointments will be made to enhance our approach to student engagement tracking and support coaching and mentoring activities. The outcomes from this programme will be key to our approach to measuring educational gain in the future.

## **Conclusion**

92. As the student case studies illustrate (para. 85), Birkbeck can change lives and does so in ways that narrowly defined metrics might not immediately capture. The College's challenge in its third century is to sustain academic excellence with open access, providing education offered in flexible ways to busy people, many of whom might not otherwise have engaged in degree-level study. We intend to rise to these challenges with a continued commitment to academic breadth and rigour, through inspirational teaching, and by embracing the opportunities that modern digital learning can provide our diverse student body.

## **Section 4: References**

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