

Provider Name: Birmingham City University

Student Submission for TEF 2023

Birmingham City University Students' Union (BCUSU) is a charity with a purpose of **empowering students, to shape their own lives.**

Our students come from highly diverse backgrounds in terms of ethnicity, the majority are local who commute, and nearly half are from some of the most economically deprived areas of the UK.

We represent all our students and create positive change within their university experience, be it inside or outside of the classroom.



Parts of the data represented in this submission was pre-existing data obtained from our Heat Map surveys. These surveys allow students to indicate where they have “issues” with aspects of their student experience, covering the University (administration, facilities, and services), the Students' Union (facilities and services), and also wellbeing, housing, and finances. A weighting method is applied to all Heat Map surveys to compensate for any over/under representation from particular faculties or demographic groups.

The Heat Map surveys used here cover 2020 (May-203 responses, July-1047 responses, and November-240 responses), April 2021 (286 responses), and July 2022 (132 responses).

We have included some data from National Student Survey (NSS) results from 2021 and 2022, and insight from our Advice and Information team.

Further insight is gained from BCU Awards nominations. These awards celebrate the outstanding achievements of staff and students across the BCU community and are delivered in partnership with the University.

Additionally, we have used student feedback from research, commissioned by BCUSU and conducted by Redbrick Research, that provides insight into the lives of students at BCU. The work, identified in this submission as Wave or Redbrick Research was conducted in Nov 2021, May 2022, Nov 2022 and includes the following-

- Focus groups- attended by a total of undergraduate students, some living in University Locks student accommodation, some living in the Knowledge Quarter, commuter students, students not involved in the Students' Union, and students who described themselves as struggling with stress and anxiety.

- Surveys (1623, 1375, 775 responses.) We have used statements from the surveys, including feedback from the first-year undergraduate students on their early experience at BCU through Wave 1 research in November 2022.

As a part of our submission work, we conducted research, in the form of a series of focus groups carried out from the 16th to 28th November 2022. The focus groups were carried out by our TEF Research Assistant, both in person and online. students attended in total, from across all four BCU faculties, and covering a variety of courses. In this document they are referred to as TEF focus groups.

As part of the process a questionnaire was also given to the attendees asking a series of questions, linked to the TEF Features of Excellence, and used to stimulate discussion.

This Student Submission has been drafted with input from BCUSU staff, including research coordinators, student representatives, and academics across the University. The research coordinator, research assistant and two elected officers have been fully engaged with writing the TEF student submission.

The University and the student contact conducted regular meetings to help with planning the TEF Student Submission, and support with queries. The Students' Union shared drafts of its submission with the University and vice versa. There was no inappropriate influence by the University with regards to writing the TEF Student Submission and independence was professionally maintained throughout.

During the TEF focus groups, the majority (89%) of the students indicated they were satisfied with assessment and feedback. They mentioned that the coursework is well structured and easy to understand. When students need extra clarification on their course work, they feel that there are opportunities to approach staff and that staff always engage with the students to support their academic work. In one TEF focus group the feedback was described as being "positively constructive". However, some (11%) students mention that having more one-to-one sessions with academics to discuss the feedback in more detail would be beneficial, in terms of understanding specific aspects of how a student's work could be improved.

Our Heat Map survey (May 2020) showed 22% of students were having issues with lack of feedback (general) which included a mix of summative and formative feedback. Our findings in May 2020 were shared with the University and some targeted work was undertaken by BCU to improve the situation. In 2021 this "issue" had fallen to 18%, and in 2022 dropped again to 17%.

Students who expressed their views on teaching quality in TEF focus groups stated that staff explained things well during lectures, and that academics organise extra activities such as Q&A sessions. This activity improves student engagement and makes sessions more interesting. These students have also mentioned that staff are always friendly, approachable, and supportive.

"I have been fortunate enough to have been taught by X in the last 3 years and he is one of those teachers you only come across once in a while. That one teacher whose lectures you never want to miss as you know they will always be interesting, fun, and useful. His pleasant personality and way of extraordinary thinking and teaching makes him a joy to be around as a lecturer" (Student submission from I am BCU Awards).

As a part of extended learning opportunities, students from every faculty within BCU could study or volunteer overseas with partner institutions during the summer and the exchange degree

programme. Through this scheme students have been to Europe, Brazil, China, Brunei, India, Mexico, South Korea, and Taiwan. Students speak of how this scheme improves their academic engagement, helps them become more employable, experience the world, and stand out from the crowd.

"I think my travels will have an effect on my planned career as a textile designer, as I will have experienced a different sort of life and project those experiences through my own perspective. Japan would hopefully be my next journey or anywhere else that is as inspiring to me personally, and hopefully I could possibly work abroad and gain a number of experiences" (Student – BA (Hons) Textile Design).

However, a few students in the TEF focus groups mentioned that they are not happy that their courses did not provide the opportunity to gain work experience, related to their industries. This was also mentioned in the Redbrick research.

During the TEF focus groups, the majority (95%) of students stated that their personal tutors actively engaged with them and organised one-to-one sessions monthly, to support with academic or personal issues. Personal tutors also provided feedback on academic progress and signposted students to other support and services. The focus group students spoke about being able to approach their personal tutor whenever they needed, and these sessions helped students to build a positive relationship with their personal tutors.

"He is encouraging, inspiring and always gives me the motivation to complete work when I need that extra push" (Student submission from I am BCU Awards).

For the few (5%) students who were not as satisfied with the support received, it was a lack of engagement from the personal tutor that was mentioned. Some students had also had their personal tutor changed several times over the years, leaving them unaware who their tutor was.

Whilst the feedback from students in the TEF focus groups indicated that students were broadly happy with their personal tutors, insight coming through our Advice and Information Team also points to some students not knowing who their personal tutor is, and also that there does not appear to be a monitoring system to check that meetings have taken place.

When discussing support from course staff/lecturers, students in the TEF focus groups specifically mentioned that they were very satisfied with the opportunities that they have of booking one- to-one sessions with academics through Moodle site which is more convenient than exchanging emails.

"Excellent support all way through the course, always respond quickly to any questions makes me feel that there is always someone to help" (Extra Mile Awards nomination).

Most of the of students (89%) from the TEF focus group mentioned that their lecturers are just an email away. Lack of staff engagement, lack of responses to students' emails, and not getting enough support from visiting lecturers were reasons given by the small number of students (11%) who were not satisfied with the academic support.

When discussing support from the central learning development service known as Centre for Academic Success (CAS) the majority of students in the TEF focus group stated that they have been able to enhance their referencing skills which they saw as useful for their assignments. They are

very satisfied with the availability that CAS provides for students to book one to one session to enhance their academic skills. One student mentioned specifically that it had helped with their grades for assignments. However, a few students stated that they did not have the chance to engage with the CAS team as they felt that the team is not available most of the time.

Support for student's mental health and wellbeing can have a huge impact on a student's educational experience, and those students in the TEF focus groups with experience of this support felt the service was accessible to all. In particular, they spoke of having the opportunity to book sessions when needed, and there not being a limit on the number of sessions. Most students felt that the interventions made by the Mental Health and Wellbeing Team helped them progress in their studies.

Some students in the TEF focus groups mentioned that more promotion regarding the Mental Health and Wellbeing Team would be beneficial as they were not aware of how to approach the team.

During the Heat Map surveys in 2022, 23% students had concerns regarding availability of mental health support; this was 21% in 2021 and 17% in 2020. In pre COVID-19, issues with mental health support and availability stood at around 5% overall and 3% - 6% in the individual ethnic categories.

"It is quite difficult to find mental health support. It is not advertised a lot and if it is then I have never seen it. It says you can get help, but it doesn't say how" (Redbrick Comment).

The Students' Union works closely with the University Mental Health team and regularly meet to discuss student perceptions on the service and how they can be improved. The University has invested in the development of mental health provision for students over the last few years with the results having a positive impact.

It's widely understood that students engaging in activity outside the curriculum is a key component in a sense of belonging and retention at university. Due to continuous support from staff and engaging with the University and Students' Union, through various activities, including BCUSU societies, every student who participated in the TEF focus groups felt that they belonged to the BCU learning community. This sense of belonging is seen as key by them in enabling students to have the opportunity to reach their full potential.

"I enjoy the university community, despite the course being quite challenging. Being around the right people makes it more stress-free along with the society meets & activities that happen outside of lectures" (Wave 1 – November 2022).

Providing a welcome, as students transition into university, supports the building of a sense of belonging. Welcome Week offers a variety of opportunities to students. 70% of students surveyed attended welcome activities in 2022 and 51% attended the Big Welcome Fair, an increase on the previous year. (Redbrick Three Sixty report 2022/23).

"I would like to thank BCU for feeling welcomed and supported throughout my first term" (Wave 1 – November 2022).

Students who did not get involved provided the following reasons, not knowing what was going on, lack of time, or not being confident enough to get involved.

The recent data from Three Sixty Wave 1 research in November 2022, informed BCUSU that 79% of students agree it is important for them to feel part of a wider student community (83% in 2021).

“I feel confident in my place at BCU, this is my second time at university and here I feel a sense of belonging that I didn’t experience previously” (Wave 1- November 2022).

Library and learning resources are a key component in ensuring that students get the most out of their studies. BCU’s expanded library service, with 24-hour access to the library and 24-hour virtual help service supports students learning effectively.

The strength of BCU’s learning resources is reflected in its NSS scores with 78.8% of students stating they were satisfied with learning resources in 2022, an increase from 71% in 2021, and a score of 80.5% in 2022 for NSS Q19 (The library resources – e.g., books, online services, and learning spaces have supported my learning well).

“The teachers are friendly, and the course is engaging. Resources are accessible to anyone who needs them, and support is always a click away” (Wave 1 – November 2022).

In the recent TEF focus groups most (88%) of the students indicated they were satisfied with Moodle and library and online resources access, specifically mentioning that they could access books, articles, and research papers online whenever they needed. Most students were satisfied with the increased availability of online learning materials such as e-books, journal articles, and e-chapters through a new reading list software (ProQuest E book Central). Support with their courses, and academic led sessions had a significant impact on students’ learning experience. However, a few (11%) students mentioned that the University needed to subscribe to more journal articles and research papers as they didn’t have access to some of the online resources via their university credentials. BCUSU’s own Heat Map data showed 29% of students indicated a lack of online learning resources in 2021 and 18% of students indicating issues with e-book availability.

A recurring issue for students is Wi-Fi (speed and connection). BCUSU’s Heat Map data has highlighted this over several years, including pre-Covid. Exacerbated by students not being on campus during Covid and reliant on their home or other networks. Wi-Fi connection issues stood at 31% in April 2020 and 18% in 2022. Wi-Fi speed issues ranged from 35% in April to 17% in 2022.

Students at the TEF focus groups appeared to have different experience of Wi-Fi depending on where they were based. Most students based in the faculty of Health, Education and Life Sciences (City South campus) had no issue with connecting to BCU Wi-Fi, with only a few (3%) students stating they had an issue on campus. However, students from the Faculty of Computing, Engineering and Built Environment, and Faculty of Business, Law and Social Sciences stated they had issues. A student based in Parkside building described the Wi-Fi as poor, and the connection as unstable. Students did indicate the Eduroam connection was good and needed to be promoted more widely, because students do not appear to know about the connection.

University IT services is aware of the Wi-Fi difficulties, BCUSU representatives and IT leadership meet regularly to improve services and have been trying to establish whether this is due to device compatibility or wider network/infrastructure issues.

Students, from the TEF focus group studying Architecture stated they have to use the printing facility frequently, so the printing cost is expensive. They felt that they should be able to get free printing in the University because of the tuition fee that they pay.

“I think that within my course, paying 9k tuition and still having to pay for so many materials and printing is not really fair” (Wave 1 – November 2022).

Most students in the TEF focus groups were satisfied with the IT facilities provided by the University, however, a few indicated they felt there was a need for more IT technicians to support the students. Additionally, a few students mentioned that there were not enough IT facilities (such as drawing tablets) for students who were studying illustration and art.

There were a few comments made in the focus groups about the availability of laptops/computers for use by students. Insight from our Advice and Information Team suggests that there are some issues with laptop loans, especially in relation to students wishing to take laptops off campus or have the laptop for an extended period. The current laptop loan policy is to not allow loans out of the buildings as standard procedure.

As part of a digital poverty campaign, led by the Students' Union, the University implemented a digital support fund where all UK students with income below £25,000 were given a laptop-for-life. 2,425 students received laptops across all faculties in 2020-2022 ensuring they can engage in their studies on campus and remotely.

One aspect not mentioned by students during the TEF focus group discussions, yet showing up in the Students' Union surveys, is in relation to study space and quiet study space. Despite areas being set aside for group and individual learning the Heat Map data showed 19% of students stating lack of study space was an issue in 2022, and 17% of students indicating quiet study space was an issue. These figures were higher during COVID-19 when students were off campus and trying to continue studying at home.

Having high quality learning and informal study spaces provides a well-received blended learning environment. Even though there are good amounts of study space, students would also like to see more dedicated social spaces with a variety of things to do when not studying, such as cafes, bars, and places to watch movies and hang out (Redbrick focus group- March 2022).

“I think more social study spots cosy and softer environment” (Red Brick Comment).

We see the additional study space, and specialised education facilities, being created at the City South campus (Health, Education and Life Sciences Faculty) as a positive development.

Student representation is a key element of how the University and the Students' Union engages with students. The Students' Union encourages students to provide feedback via various methods such as surveys, focus groups, student representatives, and directly to the academic staff to ensure that the student voice is heard and to advance the sense of belonging for all students. Students' Union staff and officers, and University staff work together, through the Student Voice Committee, to develop and oversee student representation and related student voice activity as a means of “creating positive change in the University”.

Most students (95%) at the TEF focus groups spoke about their experience of having had the opportunity to provide feedback on their courses, via mid-module evaluation. One student felt that there should be more opportunities to provide feedback, because surveys such as mid-module evaluations consist of closed question which limits the student to express views on the course. Some students stated they were more comfortable with the anonymous nature of mid-module evaluations because they could be more open in expressing their views.

Students at the TEF focus groups also felt that the staff valued students' views, and suggestions were actioned which helped to shape the student experience. Students mentioned that lecturers actively engaged with students, organising sessions to go through the feedback to make sure that the students' views were understood and appreciated. They felt this feedback was taken seriously by academics, faculties, and departments having an impact on teaching and learning at BCU. Several of the focus group attendees mentioned that they do not feel the feedback was valued by the staff, and therefore more opportunities were required to express their views on their experience at BCU.

Feedback through other channels has also been taken on board by the University. During the Heat Map survey in 2020, 23% of students raised concerns regarding interactive lectures. This was raised with the University for action and concerns about this issue dropped to 18% in 2021 and then 16% in 2022.

Whilst there is a largely positive view from the TEF focus group and the NSS on the opportunities that students have to provide feedback on their course and that feedback is valued, the available data from elsewhere indicates students appear least satisfied with what actions are taken as a result of this feedback. NSS Q25 "It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on" (at 56% in 2022) is the lowest scoring question in the Student Voice section. Data from other surveys would seem to support this. Data from Redbrick Wave showed that while the vast majority (70%) agreed that they could see efforts being made at Birmingham City University to help improve the academic experience for students, fewer students said they could see real change happening at the University as a result of these efforts, with only 55% agreeing. The responsibility to make students aware of actions taken from feedback rests mainly with staff at course and school level. Students were not necessarily aware of the outcomes of student feedback, e.g., the discussions that were taking place, the actions that were being taken, and where tangible changes were being made to affect students' experiences. Data taken from the Students' Union School Rep survey also showed that School Reps believed that 58% of students had a low level of awareness about the actions taken as a result of feedback, compared to 35% who had a high level of awareness.

In partnership with the University, through the Student Voice Committee, further changes have been made to the Representation system to increase feedback, and the visibility of feedback. These include

- Use of MS Teams planners as a focal point for feedback
- Change in name of Student Feedback forums (SFFs) to Course Feedback Forums (CFFs) - to provide clarity to students as to the purpose of the forums and reinforce the association with the academic sphere. This should also create more clarity around feedback routes.
- More focus on the identification and dissemination of good practice across courses/schools/faculties.

Our students develop significant transferable skills during their time at university which help them to step into their chosen career. According to NSS survey 2022, results show high 80%+ levels of agreement with the statements, B1.2 ("My communication skills have improved".) and B15.3 ("The skills I have developed during my time in higher education will be useful for my future career".)

Every participant in the TEF focus group agreed that their courses and the University is helping them to enhance their interpersonal skills. 95% students mentioned that confidence is one of the important skills they enhanced, and this has been also evidenced in NSS 2022 survey question B1.1 ("The course has helped me to present myself with confidence" -73.7% agreement). Students also

mentioned improving communication, research and analytical skills, teamwork, working independently, and presentation skills through their course.

“The University made me a critical thinker and I am happy that I chose BCU to study my course”. (TEF Focus Groups).

Students who participated in the TEF focus group stated that they were very satisfied with the service that Careers+ provides and cited examples of receiving help with writing CVs and cover letters, mock interviews, and being given helpful tips in how to research and prepare for future interviews.

Students spoke about having the opportunity to gain work experience during their second year and how internships had helped them to improve their professional skills and would support them with future employment. Also, students are satisfied with the information they receive from the Careers+ team regarding new opportunities every week.

“Additionally, I got real world experience of giving presentations and attending departmental meetings in which my feedback and knowledge of the UK practice was sought. This re-affirmed and refined my communication skills at higher levels” (Student submission from I am BCU Awards).

As a students' union we are fully supportive of the opportunity's students have to engage in the Graduate+ award framework based on extracurricular activities. Students can access highly personalised information, and resources to enhance student engagement. Participants who attended the TEF focus group have been satisfied with the benefits they receive due to engagement with Graduate+ team and some students mentioned that they have obtained bronze award as a part of completing different activities and are now working towards the silver award. Graduate+ activities are mandatory for some courses which help students to learn techniques such as “STAR” technique and some are happy that they have the opportunity to learn new languages by using “Rosetta Stone”.

Many students are now engaging with LinkedIn platform as a result of engaging with both Careers+ and Graduate+ teams which provide them the chance to find their future employment. However, some students in the TEF focus group mentioned that they have not received enough information regarding these services while few students stated they needed more time to settle down before engaging with these services as they are still in the first year.

We also believe that in addition to academic support, support for students in financial hardship can be vital to ensure students succeed and progress. Due to the personal nature of the subject, we did not ask about this at our focus groups, however, several years ago, as a result of our social policy and survey work, we flagged up issues with the promotion, criteria, and administration of Hardship funds. The application system was unwieldy, demonstrated by a lack of completed applications with students abandoning the process, and there was a general lack of awareness of the availability of financial support, often resulting in a lower-than-expected number of applications.

Significant changes have recently been made to the system, and we continue to work with the University providing student insight, we are encouraged that our concerns have been taken on board. Additionally, recently the University has also earmarked £50,000 of the Hardship Fund that will now be administered by the Students' Union.

BCU is always committed to fulfil students' aspirations not only during their time at the University but after their graduation. This approach is mainly focused on developing confidence, knowledge, and competence in both professional and personal learning setting for students.

To support with BCU's definition of educational gain, BCUSU provides students with unique opportunities to enhance their employability and have a positive impact on the community. This is achieved through various societies, becoming students' representatives, and providing job opportunities within BCUSU, our students are able to put their skills and experience into practice in real world and professional environments. As a Students' Union we are happy to see that our students are developing strong interpersonal skills and becoming more confident which enable them to excel in their future employment after graduation.

"Being an international student and coming from an [redacted], I always found it difficult to participate and develop. University provided me with the opportunities that every student needs, which greatly aided in my personal development. I had the good fortune to work with the international office to develop my professional capabilities. I was able to develop my leadership abilities and event planning skills as the course rep for my programme, which helped me enhance my resume and qualify for leadership positions at SU. Due to the institution's encouragement and support in helping me develop a strong personality, I was able to represent students from different backgrounds and ethnic minorities at the university level" ([redacted] Academic Experience BCUSU)

In the recent TEF focus group half of the students stated that they are satisfied with the support they received during COVID-19. Some students gave examples of help with rent through the University Hardship Fund. Participants in the focus group mentioned that the University has gone the extra mile to support students through the COVID-19 pandemic delivering course contents effectively by organising extra support sessions and conducting Q&A sessions to help with assessments and exams. Also, additional explanatory videos and audios were uploaded on Moodle site for students who are visual/auditory learners.

Students indicated that the widespread use of online lectures was beneficial because it meant they had the opportunity to go back to the recorded lectures during their revision time, and they had the flexibility of learning in the comfort of their own environment.

A few students in the TEF focus group were not satisfied with the experience they had during the COVID-19. These students didn't like the online teaching, some mentioning that they felt disconnected and isolated. A couple of the students mentioned that lecturers were arranging more than two lectures in one day which made them feel uncomfortable, and they had difficulty in focussing. Some also said they did not receive the support from academics that they expected.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the main concerns students raised was lack of study space which also appeared in Heat Map surveys; (35% in 2020, which dropped down to 31% in 2021 and 19% in 2022. This issue was obviously significant during the time of COVID-19 with students having to study from home and facing difficulty finding somewhere suitable and quiet. Students also indicated concerns in relation to lack of information about grades/classification, and lack of information about new arrangements for learning and teaching. In addition, availability, or quality of mental health support, showed as a concern across all faculties, with issues of anxiety in relation to social distancing/isolation also featuring. (Heat Map data)

A subsequent Heat Map survey (May 2020) still showed some of the same issues, but students appeared to be more confident about study/placement/assessment arrangements. The focus of their concerns turned to quality of lectures, feedback, and study support. However, as remote/online learning and teaching became more established and problems were identified and resolved by the University, these “issues” dropped down the rankings in later Heat Map surveys.

Conclusion:

When writing our submission, we chose to concentrate on several of the Features of Excellence and have drawn out some aspects evidenced by our pre-existing research and fed back to us through the TEF focus groups. Much of what we found indicated that our students are largely satisfied with their experience at university, and that they feel they are benefiting from the educational environment and being given the opportunities to achieve.

The Students' Union has a strong relationship with the University with members of Students' Union staff and elected officers holding regular meetings with the University and participating in an extensive range of committees such as Board of Governors, Student Experience Committee, and Academic Board. BCUSU staff and Officers also play pivotal roles in many sub committees and working groups such as the Mental Health Charter, Race Equality Working Group, alongside many others.

BCUSU is proud to work with, and be part of, a university that values the importance of student voice and works hard to improve the student experience. Where we have highlighted student issues that need intervention, including those aspects detailed in the submission, it's our experience that the University is open and willing to have to these discussions, and committed to resolving matters.

