

Introduction and Approach to evidence gathering

We are carers, parents, business owners, and we are also students. We are University Centre at Blackburn College students where approximately 75% of this academic year's intake are mature students, 46% are from Polar Quintile 1 or 2 and approximately a quarter identified as having a disability at enrolment. It is well documented that mature students may not feel they belong at university or college in the same way as younger students, and may not take part in extra-curricular activities as they are here for different purposes and with differing motivations. The experience may be atypical to many traditional universities but as one student stated "my academic experience has given me a purpose and direction in life which has allowed me to find myself, before coming to university I was _____ who still didn't have any idea what I wanted to do or who I wanted to be in life, now I am leaving with a set career in mind and have found a master's degree I want to do to help me achieve it".

We know mature undergraduate students are more likely than younger students to be underrepresented in Higher Education and can face different barriers to accessing and succeeding in their studies, but the experiences noted in this submission are highly positive and demonstrate excellence. Through things such as the Academic Coaches, the Get Ahead Programme (GAP) and the personal tutor system, the University Centre has processes that really consider the needs of their students.

As part of the data collection, a good representation of subjects were covered, including Law, Children and Young People, Animation and Games, Fine Art, Business and Management, Computing and Media. This was across the University Centre and accounted for 160 students. Their responses will be noted through this report. We acknowledge that this writing team were made up of Law and Business students so it was essential that we ensured all subject areas were represented in their views. Gathering data was a challenge but we strove to include as wide a variety of programmes and attendance models as possible given our resources.

From the outset, we the student group, chose to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. We did this via semi-structured interviews and questionnaires which allowed for data triangulation to ensure reliability of resources. To prevent experimenter bias, standardised procedures were used throughout the process for each participant and participation was voluntary. Our approach to contacting students to explain what was required should they wish to participate included speaking to them in their timetabled sessions to explain what the Teaching Excellence Framework is and its function and also spending time with them in the social spaces. We also requested a variety of documents from the College for a desk-based activity and challenged managers on the content to help our understanding.

SE1. When enrolling at university most students only focus is teaching and assessment, and whilst there is so much more to being a student, these factors are still very important. All students we spoke with reported receiving feedback in many ways. This consisted of face-to-face as well as receiving developmental and final feedback on the Turn it in portal on the platform Moodle. This means that we have an opportunity to improve by using that feedback in future assessments. The assessment feedback takes a SWANS approach, which means that we always have factors/pointers to improve and help the students keep motivated. Considering the student body, we have 75% mature students, and some have external commitments such as parental and work responsibilities, and the use of SWANS is an effective practice that tailors to the need of the student. One student has stated, “The feedback has been successful because I have received higher grades”. 94% of students surveyed for this submission confirmed that feedback from their tutor had helped them improve and 95% stated that their lessons are interesting. Additionally, the extra support provided by the Academic Coaches is personalised to each individual student and starts with the Get Ahead Programme at induction. Outstanding practices are further supported by the NSS questions 2, 10, and 11, Teaching and Feedback and Assessment where the Centre continually exceeds the benchmark. We asked students if their class sessions were interesting – 96% of participants answered yes to this question.

It is clear that practices are continually reviewed and new ideas embedded into teaching practice. We have been present when learning walks have taken place to quality assure the quality of teaching that is happening and the teaching staff are comfortable with this process. Given the higher than average number of mature students, the College does an outstanding job of meeting our needs through the ways they teach and assess. Many of us have stated that a traditional lecture theatre size group holding hundreds of students would not be conducive to our learning - the approaches and styles taken at Blackburn means we can and do achieve. The Students' Union President sits on Academic Board where teaching, learning and assessment practices are discussed in detail.

SE2. Students we spoke to told us how their courses inspired them to think about doing things they haven't even considered before enrolling, for example Early Childhood Studies students considering work in child protection not just working as a practitioner. The Programme Team design programmes that adhere to subject benchmarks and the knowledge, skills and behaviours required for employment. The University Centre is clearly preparing graduates for the roles they want to go into or to consider roles they had not even thought about before. The knowledge and skills embedded in the curriculum builds our confidence for the 'real world'. The institution has given me (writer 2) as a Business and Management student, an opportunity to apply to for a casual Research Assistant post. Having this

encouragement and knowledge from my studies has helped me gain upmost confidence, open my mind to many opportunities and this has only been possible with the outstanding inspiration and belief from the institution. These skills, in turn, helped me with my Research Methods and Dissertation assessment.

Additionally, the knowledge and skills embedded within our Computer Science students gives them the opportunity to gain practical hands on work experience, which is beneficial to take in the real world. A dedicated server room provides a safe space for activity they will come across in the future roles. This builds employability skills, knowledge and most significantly confidence. In class, they have real world scenarios with testing tables, which enables students to carry the skills learnt forward to the real world. This builds the students' confidence, lets them explore different fields, visualise and opens up new experiences. This relates to the NSS questions on teaching and learning, which continually exceeds benchmarks.

The Law students benefit from a dedicated Court Room which allows development of knowledge and skills in this essential practice for those wishing to pursue a career in Law. Working with employers in this facility adds to the skills and experiences.

The University Centre has been a participant of Young Enterprise Start Up over a number of years. The opportunity builds confidence and skills that allows students to enter the graduate market, or to open their own business. The skills gained build self-confidence, help form relationships, negotiation skills, and gain knowledge to access and collect data. Last year's acting Managing Director of was asked to write an article for the Young Enterprise publication which was an amazing opportunity.

It's not only current students who speak of outstanding experience and opportunities - *"As a former Student Union President, I developed a number of skills that I may not have gained elsewhere. I am confident in presenting reports, speaking publicly and voicing concerns. My experience at UCBC also gave me leadership and teamwork skills. As a result, I am able to work independently on matters that I am confident in dealing with, but also have great communication skills when talking to and assisting others which is very important for my job."*
(Former Students' Union President and graduate)

SE3. Research, up to date knowledge and knowing that employers have been involved in our courses is so valuable for our education. The world has changed so much in the last few years. Many students reported guest students being used in lectures, for example the Marriott Hotels area HR manager who provided insight and opportunities for their graduate programme. The Early Childhood Studies curriculum fully embeds Forest School within their teaching as a Thinking Forest Project. This allowed us, as students, to keep up to date with the latest trends. In Law, we get to enter the National Mooting Competition and run alumni events which allows us to develop real-life skills to use in employment and know what is expected of us in the graduate world. Oxford Community based lecturers are supporting me in my final year project, this is allowing me to gain expert support and knowledge. We get to attend Young Enterprise in which we create a business from concept to launch and learn how to seek investment with confidence. This gives us the confidence and ability to be able to set up our businesses and gain valuable business contacts. A variety of Symposiums are held every year. The Creative and Digital students have a wealth of opportunity given that Blackburn is a cultural 'Priority Place', with events such as the Textiles Biennial, The Festival of Making and the super Slow Way projects such as the Field of Flax. Additionally, many teachers have had work published and others are practitioners who engage the students within their work, for example the Criminology students providing evidence for the text book 'Teaching Criminology and Criminal Justice: Challenges for Higher Education', the students taking part in 70 voices for 70 years tapestry in commemoration of the Jubilee and the Odd Arts activities to support wellbeing during the pandemic.

SE4. To provide an outstanding experience for students it is so important that the staff continue to develop themselves too. It is clear that staff development at the College is taken seriously and the positives are seen in the teaching we have experienced and witnessed. 99% of staff at Blackburn College are satisfied in staff development. Between 98-99% of all staff, including cleaners, security (not just teaching employees) are fully trained in mandatory training. This allows us as students to feel that Blackburn College really is a supportive, inclusive organisation, in which everyone who is employed here are fully trained and committed to Blackburn's vision. Staff receive funding to further their own education with things like PHD's and Masters. This assures students the teaching they receive is of quality and currency. It also allows students and teachers to form a personal bond through discussions of balancing life with education. It shows us, as a student body, that the teaching staff take their role as knowledge sharers seriously. Due to a member of staff completing their masters and a student talking to them about it, that student has decided to continue onto their masters and gain a further qualification than originally planned. Knowing that teachers are

currently completing higher level education within the discipline they teach, gives students the confidence that the teachers are passionate and up to date within the area they are teaching.

SE5. The supportive learning environment is almost taken for granted here as the University Centre provides access to a vast array of support for a wide range of students. Classes within the University Centre are smaller and taught within a classroom setting. This allows for the interaction between staff and students to be easily heard and therefore, gives even those with a quiet voice the confidence to get involved within sessions.

There is academic support from the day of enrolment with the GAP programme and the tutorial model. All of this is also detailed in the Student Handbook as a clear reference point. There are also a large number of posters around the building which showcase the academic tutors available to students with contact details. Visibility and communication by Blackburn College to the students is high.

The University Centre offers a Disability advice service. They accept self-referrals making the service totally accessible for everyone and there does not need to be an established diagnosis in place. The service helps students to access help to gaining extra time in exams, to academic support and support with DSA.

In 2022/23 the Academic Coach team has extended the services they offer to include; time management and organisation skills, dissertation/research support, and reflective writing skills. This was a direct response to the Student Voice – the support needs are driven by the student.

We found that the Careers and Employability Strategy for 2022-2024 will build on what is existing and the Career Edge Model is a key employability model for us. To further test this we asked students if they have needed additional learning support – 35% of participants answered yes to this question. We asked students if they have used Academic coaches – 38% of participants answered yes to this question. We asked students if their class sessions were interesting – 96% of participants answered yes to this question. We asked students if they have been supported by the teaching team – 93% of participants answered yes to this question.

We found these answers correlate with the answers students submitted as part of the NSS questionnaire over the past four years. We feel this shows not only consistency from the provider but also an outstandingly supportive environment that meets the needs of the students described through this submission.

SE6. The University Centre learning resources space offers various resources to all students including a range of online databases totalling over 31 million journals and over 20,000 books. This was extended through the pandemic. Students report having high levels of service from the library and digital teams through one-to-one support.

However, there are many other outstanding sector standard resources that are discipline specific including the Engineering workshop with circa £120K worth of industry standard equipment such as HAAS and Boxford, the Mock Court set up, the observation lab for Psychology and Counselling students including over £15K of software and equipment to industry standard. The Computing students benefit from dedicated cluster labs and project labs (open access), bespoke networking and a cyber security lab. In addition, the computer suites are of the highest specification on campus. Creative and Digital students enjoy sector standard resources such as infinity wall photography rooms, a gaming suite, dedicated MAC suites and editing booths, textile and printing rooms and art studios. NVivo and SPSS are available in many computer suites and most classrooms have a large Clevertouch screen as standard.

All of this is strongly integrated into the classes and teaching we experience, resulting in interesting and active lessons. Resources are also available outside our timetabled classes.

We asked students if their class sessions were interesting – 96% of participants answered yes to this question and the NSS scores about learning resources increased almost 9% in the last year.

SE7. Our Student Voice is embedded throughout university life, using both formal and informal avenues. This is wrapped up in the 'You Said We Did' communications which is simple but effective and demonstrates that continuous improvement and feedback from and to the student body. This is managed through the Student Voice Coordinator, the Heads of School and the Assistant Principals. It is clear that the voices of students are important. Formally there is a place in the governance structure for the Student Representatives, Officer and Students' Union President. Examples of positive impact include the changing of the Academic Coach offer, the bursary payment options, library opening times, the LGBT community, targeted mental health and wellbeing guest session with the alumni, down to smaller changes such as social space furniture following the return to on campus teaching after the pandemic.

The Student Voice also plays a part in curriculum development, with students being a part of validation and focus groups to develop ideas within teaching and learning. The NSS scores further demonstrate this with 76% agreeing their voice is heard in 2020/21 and 80% agreeing in 2021/22. Both of these exceed the benchmark and most local competitors considerably. All

of the changes have positively impacted on the student experience but also supported our confidence levels, our negotiation skills and our critical thinking and communication skills, a further example of the educational gain here at the University Centre at Blackburn College.

Within some vocational areas the 40-credit dissertation has been changed into two 20-credit modules as students stated they felt it was a more achievable task. This change has seen an increase in submission and achievement rates across the programmes and of course, confidence in the students own ability.

SO1. As students we can absolutely identify that we have been supported by our personal tutors, teaching team and the wider Student Support network while we are studying at the University Centre. Students we spoke to reported the personal feel to their support, particularly from the Academic Coaches and the Access and Participation Officer. Those we spoke to, including ourselves as the writing team, reported that the assignment feedback that we have received has allowed us to improve our marks and identify a path of progression and ownership of our own academic journey and skills development.

“Before going to see an academic coach I had the feeling of being extremely overwhelmed with academic writing, but after seeing the coach my confidence and grades dramatically improved just after two sessions, they have allowed for the conquering of fears of public speaking and presentation delivery which has also helped to be carried on throughout everyday life and the strength to believe yourself.”

The Careers Education and employability experiences we are given are highly effective, for example the Education students shared examples of research groups and communities of practice that were set up by their tutor to ready them for post graduate study. The latest Matrix reports said ‘*there is an army of advocates of the IAG service amongst the student population*’. This gives us absolute faith in the support for our next steps which can be just as daunting as starting university for the demographic of our students. There are numerous alumni and employer events held.

The Creative students were recently offered an opportunity to design the College Christmas Card and this was then printed and used which will be amazing in the student’s professional portfolio. Many Student Voice events are held, for example students are able to run a stall at the University Centre’s Christmas Fair. This allows students to trial any business ideas they may have and collect data on sales, which in turn may help them create a successful business in the community. Additionally, there is a project that is running combining art and counselling, this is a great opportunity for cross collaboration and also wellbeing activities. Student reps get to meet many political bodies such as the Mayor and local MP’s which then allows them

to help make a difference within the local community on a political platform whilst building their networks and self-esteem. This allows students to form life-changing professional relationships.

SO2. The compounded completion matrix has shown a steady increase in students continuing and improving year on year on the completion metric, therefore this shows that there has been a positive impact on students' completion and progression from all the activity, and more, detailed in this submission. From year 2018/19 to 2021/22 the rate of increase of compound completion is increasing almost 10% a year. The rate includes the continuation steadily increasing from the year 2015/16 to around 80% for 2021/22. COVID-19 has played a part in this but the College provided exceptional support for students during this time and could not have offered anything more. The challenge between home schooling, key worker expectations, furlough and study space challenges was incredibly hard for many. First-year students seemed to struggle more than final year students due to not having the face to face opportunity to engage with support, where final year students had come to the end of their study programme.

SO3. When considering the progression rates, we looked at Blackburn College's Careers and Employability Strategy (2022-2024) to see how this information correlated with the key performance indicators. A strategy College use is "Explore, Evolve, Establish". Explore allows students to start thinking about the type of careers they are interested in but may not have a definitive path. Evolve allows students who have a clear career path to develop the skills and knowledge they require to facilitate their chosen path. Finally, Establish helps students who are career ready, to move on to the next stage of their career path.

The professional and educational opportunities offered to students to prepare them for the next steps into employment are outstanding. There are opportunities for every single student to meet with professionals whom they may never have had the chance to meet unless coming here. Students are able to make professional connections through the University Centre, with one student even being able to get paid employment from one such meeting within the College. This allowed to form a professional relationship with a mental health professional which then enabled them to join forces and complete charity work within the local area. The biggest challenge we see is the local availability of graduate level jobs and due to the student demographic make up we have shared, there is a greater need for many of us to stay local in employment choices. Graduates moving into employment or further studies continues to be high and given this is often the target of the students at enrolment, the University Centre has succeeded in supporting us to achieve that.

Business and Accounting students shared their experiences of careers education with one of the assignments being creation and management of a LinkedIn profile.

Business students are able to meet with leading industry experts such as John Lewis, MAG Group and HSBC during the Young Enterprise competition in which they can showcase their talents to potential employers. This provides students with the confidence to present themselves within interviews. Students are able to meet with many professionals during the Freshers Fair and Careers Fair. One student met with the _____ which helped them to see the job opportunities within the sector following graduation and they will be applying for the graduate entry programme.

Many students have stated that coming to the University Centre at Blackburn College pushed them to further their education and complete post graduate study, even though it was something they never thought they would do, showing the outstanding level of education and support the University Centre at Blackburn College offers.

SO4. Educational gain is clearly subjective but for us the educational gain has been outstanding and allowed many of us to get to a place we didn't think possible. Many of us have had poor educational experiences so far and over 50% of us are first generation university student attendees. This will mean positive role models for our children and siblings. The University Centre allows students the ability to develop personal and professionally during their time here. Students have a wealth of opportunity to gain practical and academic knowledge, social experiences, gain independence and confidence through interaction and exchange of knowledge and information with peers, employers and tutors. The outstanding support that the University Centre offers students has helped students gain the "strength to believe in themselves", this gives us the self-confidence to go into the professional world and gain employment within jobs which they are more than capable of doing but may not have thought they were before. Although the College offers outstanding support, they also provide the space required for students to gain the independence needed to take into the working world and contribute to our communities and improvement. This helps build the bridge, whilst not becoming overwhelming.

SO5. Being able to identify one element of support given is difficult as there is such a wealth of support available for each different need. Not all students need or want the same thing but we did not find a student who reported not being supported to achieve their own targets, that is challenging for an organisation to deliver but our University Centre does it and does it well! One such example is the GAP programme for all new starters. This assesses the study skills need of students who are then provided with a menu of support, both group and individual, to ensure those first weeks at university are supported and not over whelming. The main

educational gain we have detailed is confidence to achieve and progress and the ethos of the Centre seems to be confidence and opportunity rich. From the academic support, the feedback models, the Student Support Network, the employer opportunities, the wealth of knowledge from the teaching teams, the continual belief they show in us and the respect towards the Student Voice showcase a highly effective approach and the increase in outcomes and the student experience shows that.

One of our 77% students has been named 'volunteer of the month' both for her work in advocating for others to volunteer, and for the quality of her work as a 77% , her placement used words like 'sensational' and 'stunning', praising her impact on this important service and its community of users.

During COVID-19, to ensure the continuation of learning, students stated teaching went online through Microsoft Teams. Students were fully informed on how to access Teams and teachers provided classes via video classes which ensured we could see them and have as close a classroom experience as possible. Classes were recorded to allow for technical difficulties and to enable students to review and revise, classes were carried out to the best of the tutor's abilities. The use of Microsoft Teams allowed for independent learning but also allowed for peer to peer support.

SO6. It is clear that the impact of the wealth of support offered to us to achieve is evaluated through the discussion held through the College governance structure. This starts at the Programme Committee Meeting level where the Student Reps are present with the programme action plans being shared and discussed and culminates at the Corporation Board with more strategic papers. There are organisational and external KPI's as expected but evaluation is more than this. Students are asked about processes and activities to gain qualitative evaluation over and above the numbers using things like the PEQ, The Stop and Ask and the Assistant Principal and Governor meetings have seen changes in activity such as more workshop activity as part of the teaching, changes in curriculum including adding the Forensic module in the BSC (Hons) Psychology to meet the BPS framework making student more employable after graduation, financial support package changes as a result of the cost of living crisis and more local graduate level industry links.

This submission is written by University Centre at Blackburn College students and we believe that the content offered gives outstanding examples of the excellence within our organisation and the key role it is playing within college based higher education.