

The Guild of Students

University College Birmingham (UCB) Guild of Students (The Guild) is the recognised representative body for over 7,000 students studying at UCB, across both higher and further education as well as apprenticeships. The Guild exists to represent and promoting students' academic voice to the University, promoting and protect students' academic and inter-academic interests; providing and supporting an effective system of student representation; and playing an active and central part in developing student life. The Guild's strategy is built around a student lifecycle model, supporting students to achieve their personal best so that they can go on to meaningful futures. Through a three-level approach: we seek to ensure all students have tailored support when they need it (Got Your Back); and a sense of belonging (Find Your People); so that they can go on to shape their lives now and into the future (Shape Your Life). This aligns closely with the University's own Strategic Plan, particularly around Student Experience.

The Guild receives funding from UCB in order to undertake these core functions, as recognised in our shared partnership agreement, this year receiving £200,000 in block grant funding from the institution.

UCB staff have worked both directly and indirectly with students on their own TEF submission, including inviting Guild officers to respond to the University's submission. They have also been supportive of the Guild in our student submission, helping to facilitate focus groups and providing access to data and information. This is not uniquely in response to the expectations of the Office for Students, but rather a developing shared approach to student voice building over the last four years since the Guild became an independent Charity.

1. Approach to Evidence Gathering

Student Surveys

We have three years of termly survey data, from the entire student population, which has informed our response and directed our focus towards extra evidence gathered to complete our submission. We use this data in our core work to shape campaigns in the student interest, by providing evidence at a course and departmental level for course reps to improvements and changes. We also provide this data to our elected Executive team to shape their work at the highest institutional levels. Our 2021-22 annual survey was sent to all 4,930 HE students and 748 students responded. Our November 2022 termly survey was sent out to all HE students, with 264 responses in total.

Although we focus primarily on contemporary evidence, gathered across the first semester of 2022-23, and the 2021-22 academic year, we do make use of historic data to identify positive and negative trends amongst our students. Crucially, this data spans the period in which students were impacted by the Coronavirus pandemic. We felt this was important to include to capture extraordinary circumstances faced during this, provide an assessment of the University's response and to also give an understanding of the direction travelled since. For this we have made use of our June 2020 Coronavirus Survey, sent out to 6,930 students across Further and Higher Education, with 471 HE students responding.

Alongside our own data, we have made use of University provided student survey data, including the National Student Survey.

Course Rep Data

Our Course Rep system is made up of self-selected peer representatives from every course at UCB. In total, the Guild holds 137 course reps across the institution. Our team of reps is supported by the Guild's two career staff members, primarily by our Head of Student Communities, as well as by our elected officer team. Reps undertake their roles first and foremost at a course level, gathering and hearing student feedback and opinions. They then work together with UCB staff in their departments to affect positive change. Our reps also work as a collective body, bringing together their insights to influence and affect change at an institutional level through Subject Boards and Board of Studies. Students complete mid-module assessments as well as end of module feedback, and these are successfully utilised both to make in course changes as well as review for future years.

Focus Groups

We ran focus groups in November and December 2022 to add additional input and qualitative detail to the themes we identified through broad surveying. In total we ran:

- An open focus groups for all students, looking at how the student experience functions at UCB. This was attended by 22 students from all faculties, with a slight overrepresentation of women students.
- A focus group with students who had been involved in course-linked volunteering – chosen to focus in on specific aspects of student outcomes highlighted by our surveying, attended by 11 students, broadly representative of each course.

Student Feedback on our Submission

The draft of the report was shared in a play back to our sabbatical officer team to offer insight and feedback, and we are very grateful for their reflections.

The report was signed off by the UCB Guild Executive on 23rd January 2023.

2. Student Experience

We are confident that, at a senior level, UCB pays effective attention to the interrelationship between teaching, feedback and assessment, and its relationship to the student journey. This has been continually improving over the last three years and is reflective of strategic work to shift the cultural approach of the University under the leadership of the relatively new Executive Management Team.

“Senior management have looking into restructuring and remodelling the working practices of the University. Currently, they’re focussing on diversity, inclusive curriculums and inclusive exams. This is working well for students, especially with the Inclusivity Project” (Guild President, 2022-23)

Teaching Quality

In our November 2022 survey, 94% of students surveyed agreed that the teaching on their course was excellent. This is 22pp higher than Scale 1, and 25pp higher than Q27 in the 2022 National Student Survey, which was impacted by lower satisfaction from Creative students. This is discussed in detail in the University's submission, and we support that analysis. Excellent teaching quality is evident across the full ranges of courses at UCB, with students particularly pointing towards the knowledge and passion of teaching staff as fundamental to this.

"Lectures are informative and well presented." (Childhood and Education)

"My skills in baking have definitely improved since I started to learn about bakery in depth" (Food)

"The teaching is excellent because the teacher understands the subject and teaches it in an understandable and engaging way." (Sport)

"The lecturer goes out of their way to have a one to one with each student to get an understanding of the students work and see if each student has a thorough understanding of the task. Nearly every lecture and seminar the students are given clear and concise information on how they can start their career" (Specialist Hair and Media Make Up)

A vast majority of students – 90% surveyed in our June 2020 Coronavirus Impact research - felt strongly throughout the pandemic that they wished to return to face to face teaching. Comments from students in our June 2020 Coronavirus Impact research were incredibly similar across the board. The major themes captured were the impact felt from lacking the physical space to develop practical skills essential for their future pathways, missing the support from lecturers that came from face-to-face interaction and the difficulty of adjusting to learning online.

The following quotes are illustrative of dozens near identical comments from students across a wide range of courses.

"Not as easy to get support from lecturers on assignments"

"Not able to attend clinic sessions to further develop clinical skills."

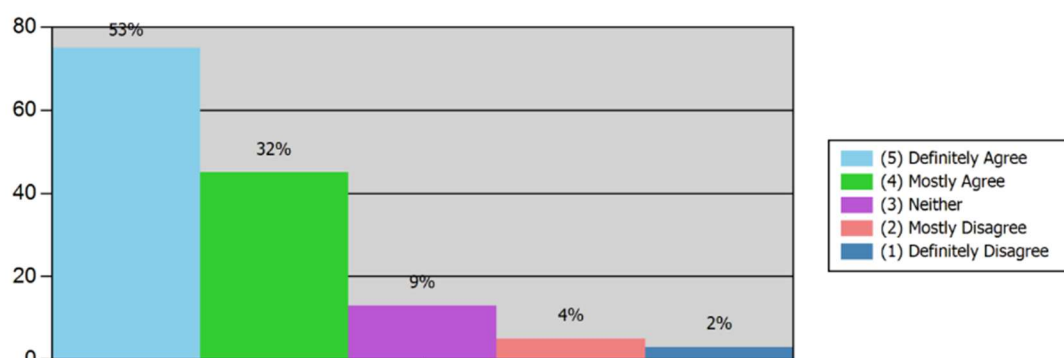
"As the majority of my course was meant to be practical, missing out on those elements has disadvantaged me for future employment, as I have less work to show on my portfolio."

Successive elected officer teams felt that the University responded quickly and incredibly effectively to this, moving as soon as government restrictions allowed to return all eligible teaching to campus as quickly as possible. The University showed great flexibility and initiative in order to maximise the time students would have on campus, working in consultation with the Guild to move the 2nd semester of 2021 back a fortnight. Students who received on campus education quickly – in vocational settings – expressed great satisfaction at being able to access this in mid-module assessments and at Boards of Study, where Course Reps meet with academic staff to review to date. Similarly, those unable to return due to government regulations remained dissatisfied with their learning experience. We believe this is reflected especially in responses to the NSS over the past two years as those students complete the rest of their education.

There is rarely low dissatisfaction expressed by students with the quality of their teaching, yet where it is expressed, it is often regarding online teaching, mirroring what students value the most from their education – interactive learning from knowledgeable and passionate teachers. This is always specific to particular courses, and when patterns are identified, course reps work with University staff to seek adjustments.

Assessment & Feedback

feedback: I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course



When surveyed in November 2022, 85% of students agreed that they had the right opportunities to provide feedback on their course. This is broadly in line with responses from our 2021-22 survey, where 84% of students agreed this to be the case, but 10pp higher than the equivalent question – Q23 – in the 2022 NSS.

We believe that this increase is reflective of increased time on campus post-lockdown leading to higher quality relationships between staff and students, or rather than decreased campus time led to students feeling unable to provide feedback. Qualitative responses make clear that, when agreeing, it is the relationship between lecturer and student that makes the fundamental difference to students' experiences here.

“Through online and written feedback, teachers take into account what students need to see and hear in a module” (Definitely agree - Aviation and Airport Management)

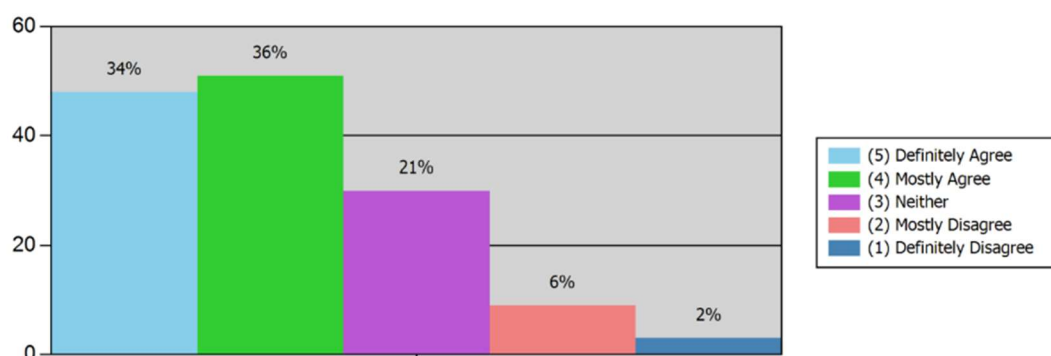
It's notable that, when offering improvements, students who agree with the opportunities to feedback suggest material changes that will improve the experience of feeding back for the wider cohort. Improvements are offered such as making sure feedback forms are filled out without the lecturer present. Others suggest adding extra touch points throughout the year so that students can see changes made in course rather than feel they are only making improvements for the next cohort to come.

Students who disagree, meanwhile, suggest offering broad basic feedback tools that we would expect to already be made use of at a course level – such as requests to fill in surveys, offer them opportunities to feedback directly to lecturers, and access to a Course Rep. The inference being that these opportunities, as expected and directed by the University itself, are not available on that course. This is reflective of feedback from Course Reps, with some reporting on exceptional practice within their courses whilst Course Reps from other courses feel unable to provide feedback or don't feel heard. When a situation

such as this is raised, elected Officers will relay these concerns to University senior management who take them seriously, and will follow up with course leads.

We see these two distinct patterns across courses, and individual student feedback almost always correlates with the feedback and input provided by Course Reps from those areas. This is, in turn, provided to the University through Boards of Studies and regular catchups between elected officers and senior leadership.

feedback_acted_on: It is clear how student feedback on the course has been acted on



Another theme that emerges from those who disagree is that students speak of not seeing change on their course despite providing critique or feedback. This is reflected in the lower agreement on clarity around action on changes in our November 2022 survey, with 70% agreeing, but 21% being unsure how to respond. Once again, this correlates with our 2021-22 end of year survey, with each response being within 1% of the later year. This is 13pp higher than the responses to Q24 in the 2022 NSS. We believe this is illustrative of year-on-year changes taking place, especially reflective of work discussed below, to improve feedback practice leading to improved results across year groups.

The University's responsiveness to student feedback is illustrated in work carried out to improve assessment practice across the 2021-22 year. Following feedback provided at Board of Studies, the University made assessments more inclusive, broadening the case studies and contexts provided, reflective of the diversity of the student body at UCB. This has been well received by students.

“Speaking with students – especially practical based students such as Specialist Hair and Media Make Up, Physio and Sports-based courses – there is clear feedback that their assessments are even more reflective of industry experience and real-life application since the review of assessment practice” (Guild President, 2022-23)

Placement Experience

UCB offers both course-level integrated placements, designed to support students to develop their professional skills and regulated professional practice for NHS students.

Feedback on placement experience is generally very positive. In our 21-22 annual survey, 71% of students stated that they felt positive with the level of placement support available. Students spoke highly of the support available from the Hired team, the professional services division responsible for placement opportunities.

“They are very helpful and easy to approach and when having any queries with placement they are resolved quickly”

“There are so many placements available it's hard to choose but the level of support given is amazing it feels like you have a whole team behind you”

“They have been great with working with me and placement. I have had some difficulties finding a placement and issues with my DBS however they have been very supportive and keeping me involved in every decision made”

Problems students face around placements are generally more individual and related to student expectations rather than institutional issues.

“I wish there was more options, but I understand why there wasn't that many”

“I struggled to receive a placement”

The Guild worked closely with the Hired team last year to look at the placement experience and recognise the complexity of this work. We have seen a real commitment to improving the placement experience for each individual student and feel the placement experience is a real strength of the institution. Of note is the intent to ensure that students have industry-relevant placements that support them in developing their future work pathways.

Student Support

Academic support is extremely highly rated by students across UCB. Support is broad and well promoted, as well as individually personalised. At its absolute best, practice of which is found throughout the University, students receive tailored one on one support with lecturers and support staff building strong relationships, endeavouring to understand their students as people as well as gain context of their lives. This is evidenced throughout every source – in 2022, UCB won the WhatUni Student Choice Award for Student Support, with an average score of 4.39 out of 5 making it the highest of any UK University. Students speak of a strong sense of welcome and belonging. They feel like they are included and part of a community.

“When we ran our Welcome events, in partnership with the University, we gave students a space to tell us what they wanted from the University experience and how they had gotten on so far. It really stood out to me how so many students said what a positive and welcoming experience they'd had in their first few weeks.” (Guild Vice President, 2022-23)

Staff are responsive to student needs and operate an open-door policy, being asked to ensure they respond to student emails within 3 working days. There are many examples of student feedback being positively responded to. Students raised concerns on the opening hours of the library as a study space. The Guild successfully worked with UCB to increase the opening hours, and this is now open until midnight in term time.

This approach is also seen at a course level. The University has worked directly with Course Reps studying computing to improve access to software. Initially, this software was not available in the library, and Reps came to the Guild for support with this. The Guild supported the Reps to speak to students on their course to get an understanding of the scale of need, and in turn take this to their Subject Board. With the students working together with course leaders, the University is in the process of getting this software installed on campus, as well as looking at individual licensing. We see regular practice of staff showing great willing to work with students who have identified issues, to rectify and improve their learning.

Learning Resources

The University has invested significantly in facilities, both buildings and teaching spaces, which students are very complimentary about, nominating UCB in the 'facilities' category of

the WhatUni awards. These facilities are integral to the teaching practice of UCB, exposing students to bespoke, and often world class, learning facilities with staff to have been and/or are actively engaged in their industries.



Nursing Simulation Suite



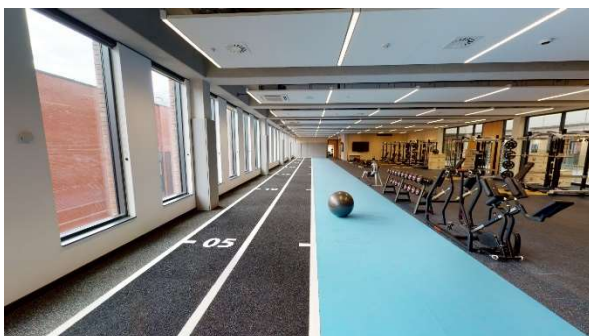
Aviation Suite

Students comment positively on the real working environments they can study within, and in curriculum revalidations there is a clear thread of application of theory across all areas. In Boards of Study, Course Reps continually report that being able to study and apply theory in a safe practice environment builds experience and confidence before entering industry.



Bar Area within Restaurant@UCB

Guild Officers speak particularly highly of positive feedback from sports students regarding the University's Human Performance Centre and practical provision.



Human Performance Centre

“In Sport, there is consistent positive feedback from Course Reps as to the impact of such professional quality equipment on their education. The equipment is brand new, of a professional quality, and Gold Standard within the Lab. Students feel the impact of this professional quality on their education, and in their confidence to practice within external professional settings.” (Guild Vice President, 2022-23)

This investment into facilities goes beyond the purchasing of high-quality equipment to the use of industry-experienced teaching staff who are able to put together their industry

knowledge and teaching expertise to take a pedagogical approach to space design. This is particularly evident in new facilities, and can also be seen in clinic spaces, across catering provision and in the University's Financial Trading Suite.



Aspire Aesthetics Clinic

Student Engagement

The Guild has three professional staff members, with extensive experience between them in student engagement, having worked previously as lecturers, institutional support staff and in national student engagement with the National Union of Students. Beyond that, the Guild has two paid sabbatical officers annually drawn from the student body, and a volunteer team. The Guild team works extensively with academic and professional services staff throughout the University and seeks to operate in an integrated and complimentary way which best serves our student membership.

In 2021, the Guild and the University established a Partnership Agreement through which we have established agreed ways of working. We consider our relationship with the University to be a symbiotic one, in which both organisations bring great benefits to the other for our shared interest in an exceptional student experience.

The University works extensively with students daily, integrating students at all levels across University decision making. Beyond representative structures, the University really does strive to include students in its forward-thinking project work and recognises the value of student engagement here. A pertinent example is the institutional-wide Inclusive Practice Action Plan. Guild involvement was sought from the very beginning in conceiving of and imagining the project. In the implementation of an Inclusive Curriculum Framework, alongside consulting with staff and engaging with up-to-date research, the entire resource is co-created with paid recruited Student Curriculum Consultants. This not only ensures the project has much needed expertise and insight from students who are experiencing their education first-hand, it also gives these students the experience of project development, delivery and pedagogical research practice.

The University also recognises the need to learn from students directly, particularly on areas of expertise and knowledge of students' lives.

The Guild will be working, out of the Inclusivity Project, with the University on identifying more opportunities to take this work forward.

A good example of work that has been carried out here already is in reforming the information desks of the University. The Guild took student feedback to senior staff that students felt overly policed on campus. At this point, the front desks of the University were run almost entirely by Security Staff, with the entrance and exit of buildings being around security and protection. This example illustrates the cultural rather than individual issues – the vast majority of the staff were excellent, friendly and welcoming on an individual level

and students enjoyed a good relationship with them. The University carried out a review, creating a reception team focussed on welcome and information, as well as reforming the presentation of the security team. This has been extremely successful.

There is a genuine passion and commitment from senior leadership to develop a partnership approach at UCB. As is to be expected, this is not without its challenges. There is work to be done to ensure that the frameworks and structures surrounding this work is well resourced and joined up across the University.

We do not feel this is a unique issue to UCB, and through our work with many other students' unions recognise this is work with national significance. Working in partnership between students and staff, especially when there are two organisations involved, can lead to communication issues especially when it comes to communicating effectively and efficiently directly to students. There are also, as ever, questions of investment and resourcing in the right areas for the best quality and value of outcomes. With the right attention, and we do believe getting this right should be an organisational wide priority for both the University and the Guild, we feel that this could be improved significantly. We have committed with the University to undertaking a joint Student Voice Strategy. We are confident in the organisational commitment to this and believe we will see great strides taking in the coming years here.

3. Student Outcomes

The Guild works extremely closely with the University to ensure students receive positive outcomes from their studies. We believe it is clear from the evidence provided above how much future work and pathways is integrated in the learning experience students receive.

The University's submission will contain statistical information on the outcomes and destinations of our students. It is somewhat outside of the expertise of the Guild, as a representative body of students, to add to that aspect of analytical data. What we do have experience and expertise in, however, is who our students are, and what they seek from their experience. We therefore have focussed on the perception and wants of students as they move through their student journey, in line with the Guild's own strategic priority of working with the University to enable students to achieve their personal best and move on to a positive future.

One statistically evidenced outcome we do want to draw particular attention to is the work the University has undertaken, through its inclusivity plan, to tackle the black attainment gap. The gap between Black and white students reduced to 14pp, from 38pp between 2020 and 2022. The gap between Asian and white students from 25pp to 12pp. This is an exceptional achievement that we are proud of our institution for. Whilst we will continue to be part of work to reduce these gaps to zero, we feel it is very illustrative of an institution able to affect positive change in the right areas for its students.

We believe it is essential that the Office for Students and Department for Education recognise outcomes in terms of wider civic impact, distance travelled for students, and the impact institutions have on their local economy and community. In our annual surveys, and in our recent focus groups, we asked students what it is about a UCB education that matters to them. Overwhelmingly, students speak of "meaningful" futures. Students come to UCB with particular career pathways in mind, with many taking specifically designed pathways to enter those careers. UCB's impact in some of those areas is world class, and it deserves noting. The College of Food, for example, produces many notable chefs who go onto gain

Michelin stars, work in the Ritz, run 5-star hotels just to name some examples. But, far wider reaching, and less about single individual achievement, is the impact this level of work has on the city of Birmingham itself. UCB students go on to work across the city in the catering, restaurant and hospitality sectors. This has been a direct influence on the rise of Birmingham as a culinary destination. This in turn has an enormous impact on the sense of self-esteem and self-worth our students have – important to note, not only those who are directly studying in these areas.

Students at UCB talk about the immense pride they have in studying at this institution. They can see the direct impact their work has on their city and their community. These outcomes are less quantifiable than individual salary data, or the progression that students take 6 months after graduation. The impact on the city region is quantifiable, however. Research carried out by London Economics in November 2022 showed that the estimated impact on the UK economy of UCB, in 2020-21, was approximately £358 million¹, with much of this impact felt in the West Midlands. This impact on the economic and social wellbeing of the region is felt individually by UCB students, moving into better and meaningful employment and feeling part of the redevelopment and renaissance of their city.

4. Conclusion

We have confidence and belief in the direction of travel of UCB as well as the focus and willingness at the senior level to make an exceptional learning experience for all students. Throughout our submission, we have demonstrated that students are extremely happy with the quality of their education. We also believe that UCB is truly sector leading when it comes to student support, both in terms of practice but also ethics and values. There is much for other institutions to learn from how UCB operates, and we are rightfully proud of our institution for this. Where we do feel needs attention is ensuring that this experience is of an extremely high quality regardless of what course of study a student is carrying out, and in some cases ensuring that specific professional services teams are understanding a whole-University approach to their work, and subsequently are supported to recognise the importance of student belonging to the institution in their work.

Through working together on the TEF process, we recommended that we work together with the University on a shared Student Voice Strategy between the University and the Guild. This would look at the time, investment and structures needed to operate exceptional student voice practice across the University and the Guild – as well as identifying high performing course practice to transfer learning across the entire University. This was extremely well received and will be taking place. We believe this provides more evidence, beyond that contained within existing statistics, of the commitment to student engagement held by the University.

We believe that UCB is an excellent institution, that knows its students incredibly well, provides exceptional student support to a diverse student body to help them achieve their desired futures, and adds much to the value and esteem of the city of Birmingham, the wider West Midlands and increasingly, on an international stage.

¹ <https://londoneconomics.co.uk/blog/publication/the-economic-and-social-impact-of-university-college-birmingham-november-2022/>