



Student Written
Submission

2010

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Faculty List

Faculty	Abbreviation	Campuses
Birmingham City Business School	BCBS	City North
Birmingham Institute of Art and Design	BIAD	Gosta Green, Margaret Street, Vittoria Street, Bourneville
Education, Law and Social Sciences	ELSS	City North
Faculty of Health	Health	City South, City North
Performance, Media and English	PME	City North, Conservatoire, Birmingham School of Acting (Millennium Point)
Technology, Engineering and the Environment	TEE	Millennium Point, City North

Introduction

Birmingham City Students' Union has welcomed the opportunity to participate in the QAA audit process at Birmingham City University, both through the creation of this submission and through the involvement of our officers in the work the University has been doing. Through our preparation of this submission, we have been able to greatly increase our understanding of the views of our students on a range of topics and to identify both the groups of students and the issues where we still require further research. We have relished the opportunity to try and engage with groups of students we have not previously been engaging, and to build up a far more developed picture of what the student experience here at Birmingham City University is really like. We aim to be able to use this experience to work alongside the University to achieve concrete improvements that will benefit all our students in the future.

We would like to extend our sincere thanks to the University for their help and support in the creation of this submission, and in particular their willingness to provide both documentation and specific information whenever these were requested. Particular thanks must go to the University's CELT, whose generous support in funding the Union to carry out research into student opinion has been much appreciated, and indeed made possible avenues of research that we would not otherwise have had the resources to attempt.

As Officers of the Students' Union we also wish to thank the members of Union staff who put together the majority of this submission on our behalf, and in particular Sarah Blatchford, Representation Coordinator, and Jema Davis, Representation and Democracy Manager.

The Union believes that much has changed at this institution since the last full QAA audit. We have noted the recommendations that were made at the previous audit, as well as the University's response to them in the Briefing Paper. We have chosen not to include a section of this submission directly addressing these or the recommendations made in the previous Student Written Submission, as we have little to add to the University's own comments and feel it is more appropriate to devote this submission to the student experience as it is today.

Readers must be aware that students are in general more inclined to comment on the things they are dissatisfied with than those they are pleased with. Throughout this document, we have presented both quantitative and qualitative feedback from students, and it should be noted that the more qualitative feedback is sometimes negative even where there are high percentage scores for satisfaction overall. The Union believes the more qualitative feedback is vital in developing our understanding of the student experience and how it can be improved, but it is never intended to invalidate the quantitative feedback where this paints a more positive picture.

Whilst it should be clear from this submission that there are elements of the student experience at Birmingham City University where improvements are to be desired, the Union is confident that in general the issues we raise are ones that the University is already aware of and for the most part already taking action on. The National Student Survey 2010 results, which were made available in the final stages of drafting this submission, make clear that there is work still to be done in some areas.

Through our recently developed partnership work with the University on a number of new initiatives, the Union has been able to get involved in and influence a wide range of elements of the student experience. This has given us

both a greater insight into the way the University manages itself and a direct ability to ensure that the needs of students are taken into account at all levels. Overall the Union is confident that the University satisfies the requirements of the vast majority of students, whilst excelling in the provision of various areas of the student experience across a wide range of subjects as well as offering areas of unique innovation.

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Methodology

The Union has used a wide range of sources of information in the writing of this submission, including both pre-existing information such as the National Student Survey and our own research for example through focus groups. We have aimed to incorporate both quantitative and qualitative information throughout each chapter of this document. This section sets out the different methods we have used to gather and interpret information regarding student opinion and clarifies how we have tried to present that information throughout this submission.

The intention with this Student Written Submission from the very beginning was to use it as an opportunity to find out more about groups of students that the Union had found hard to engage and communicate with previously. In December 2008, an internal meeting of Union officers and staff identified four groups that we wanted to focus on; part-time students, international students, disabled students and students studying at franchise colleges.

The money received following a successful bid on the part of the Union for funding from the University's CELT was mainly spent on recruiting Student Research Assistants, who helped us to run and record focus groups and interviews with specific groups of students, as well as carrying out an additional short research survey across different University campuses. This funding was also used to provide incentives to the students who participated in focus groups and additional research surveys, such as printer credits or Amazon vouchers.

This SWS is formatted around the idea of the student lifecycle, beginning with the information a prospective student sees about the University, continuing through their induction and various aspects of their student experience here, their ability to give feedback to the University and finishing with student views on their employability after they leave the University. Most chapters begin with an overview of student opinion on that particular matter, usually making use of data from the National Student Survey (NSS) and the University's own Student Experience Survey (SES), and then have sections on the views of the specific groups of students listed above. Where there is no section on one or more of these specific groups of students in a particular chapter this is due to the Union being satisfied that our research has not uncovered any specific views relating to that group of students that differ from the more general experiences of students already detailed in the chapter.

The exception is franchise students; because these are students who do not have BCU as their main place of study and because the Union has never before communicated with these students, there is a stand-alone chapter on the research we carried out with franchise students.

NSS and SES

Throughout this submission, we make frequent reference to the NSS and SES. The NSS is carried out with final year undergraduate students, whilst the SES is completed by non-final year undergraduate students. They have a similar structure, although there are differences between both the questions asked and the breakdown of the results. Throughout this document we have been using the 2009 results for both surveys, so the surveys were completed by students during the 2008-09 academic year. The initial results of the NSS 2010 came out during the final phase of drafting this document, so we have not been able to analyse them for this submission.

When analysing the NSS results, we have sometimes made reference to the JACS course code groupings provided in the NSS tables of results. These refer to one or

more courses in a particular area, for example the JACS grouping 'Design Studies' includes several courses taught at BCU. When these are referred to, it should be understood that this grouping relates to one or more related courses rather than one specific course. In other cases, we have broken this down further and used information on specific courses.

With our analysis of results from the NSS and SES, we have sometimes referred to statistics that come from a small number of responses, for example when looking at the responses on a specific course or subject area, or from students with a specific type of disability. In all cases where the number of respondents was fewer than 50, we have included the number of respondents in brackets. With NSS results, we have also included the percentage response rate this represents; we do not have this information for the SES. This is to ensure that the views represented are taken in context; the Union believes that even if it is a small number of respondents or a relatively small percentage response rate it is important that these views are considered, but it is also important to make clear how representative these views may be.

International Students

One of the main sources available to us in examining the views of international students, in addition to the breakdowns of the NSS and SES, was the International Student Barometer (ISB). We have mainly referred to the Autumn 2009 ISB results, with occasional additional references to the Summer 2009 results.

In order to provide more qualitative feedback, the Union ran two focus groups with international students, held on the 25th and 26th March 2010. The first, disappointingly, was only attended by 2 students. The second was attended by 10 students. In addition to these groups, a similar list of questions was posed to a meeting of the international students' society, at which a further 5 students were present, making a total of 17 international students who contributed in-depth information on their experiences and opinions. The majority of these students came from the Business School.

Part Time Students

As well as using the data from the NSS and SES, the Union attempted to hold focus groups with part time students, but had a very low response rate with some negative feedback commenting that as part time students aren't on campus for long and sometimes not at all during the day, students would not be able to attend focus groups. The Union decided therefore to send out an email survey in April 2010 targeting part time students specifically, consisting solely of open-ended questions in an attempt to get more qualitative feedback (Appendix 1). This proved more successful, and 27 part time students from across all faculties responded with useful information, although it should be noted that this feedback is less in depth than that from focus group discussions.

Disabled Students

Again, as well as using the data from the NSS and SES, the Union attempted to hold focus groups with disabled students, and again this proved unsuccessful. Ultimately, the Union was able to hold an interview with one student, and then three more responded to an email survey similar to the one sent out to part time students (Appendix 2). The Union recognises that this is a very small sample of disabled students, and this should be taken into consideration throughout this submission.

The Union also notes that the sample sizes referred to regarding students with different disabilities in the NSS and SES are sometimes also of a similar size, and

again that this means the data provided may not be entirely representative. For example, in the SES 2009 results, students with a hearing or sight impairment were the least satisfied group of students in terms of overall satisfaction with the quality of their course, and in most of the sections of the SES their satisfaction score was the lowest compared with students with other disabilities and students without a disability. This information is included throughout where the Union believes it is noteworthy; however, the number of students with hearing or sight impairments who answered these questions is sometimes very low.

The Union regrets that it was unable to engage more disabled students in this research, and will attempt to carry out further research based on some of the initial information provided from the students we did speak to and from the survey statistics in the future.

Franchise Students

The Union held successful focus groups for franchise students at two local colleges, with a total of 68 franchise students participating. As this information has been compiled into a separate chapter, further details of our research with these students are included at the start of that chapter.

Short Research Survey

To accompany the information from the specific groups of students listed above, and to add more qualitative information to the information from the NSS and SES, the Union put together a short research survey that our student staff took out to students across the different campuses. This consisted of just five open questions, and is included at Appendix 3. In total 183 students completed the survey, the majority studying at City North, Millennium Point and Edgbaston (City South) campuses, with a few responses from Gosta Green and Conservatoire. This was a useful exercise in allowing a larger sample of students from across the University to identify the things they felt most strongly about, rather than being prompted to respond to questions on specific issues.

Other Information

The Union has also made use of other documents and publications from the University when compiling this report, including minutes of meetings, the University's website, prospectuses, various policy and procedure documents and (draft) versions of the University's Briefing Paper to the QAA auditors. These are referred to specifically throughout the document where they have been referenced. The Union has also taken anecdotal information from the Union's Advice Centre staff where appropriate, and on occasion information from other surveys the Union has carried out previously. Unfortunately, we were unable to get much contribution from student representatives across the University; possible reasons for this are mentioned in the section on Student Representation.

Use of Comments

Throughout this submission, comments from students taken from various sources have been included. In general, the comments used are examples chosen from a range of similar comments to illustrate a wider point or issue. We have tried to include comments highlighting both positive and negative aspects of the student experience. Negative comments are useful in giving us an understanding of how things can be improved; where several have been included, it is because we feel each individual comment adds to our understanding of student views on a particular topic. These should be taken in context; they are not intended to suggest a major cause for concern when the statistics given paint a more positive picture.

With each comment, we have indicated if the student is from one of the specific groups we were researching (part time, international etc.), where the comment came from (NSS, ISB, Union Survey etc.), and where possible included the relevant course and faculty. Comments have occasionally been edited for spelling to ensure greater clarity, and edited down to ensure only opinions relevant to the topic are included.

Evaluation of Methodology

Overall, the Union is satisfied that this submission is an accurate reflection of student views at Birmingham City University. Through using the NSS and SES in particular, we are satisfied that the statistical data we have comes from a substantial sample of the student population. We have tried to be clear, both in this chapter and throughout the submission, where the qualitative data we are using has come from and how many students were involved in feeding back to us. We feel that the quality of the information provided, even where it is not from a large number of students, means it is right to include it for consideration, even if only to identify areas where further research is necessary to establish whether the views expressed are more widely held.

We are pleased that we have been able to gather the views of groups of students that we have not previously spent much time talking or listening to, and in particular our success in gathering the views of franchise students who are often forgotten when the Union discusses the student voice. We feel this approach has been beneficial; however there are some groups of students that we have not focussed on whose views we cannot claim to represent in this submission. In particular, the opinions of postgraduate students were not specifically sought, and as they are not included in the NSS or SES their input into this submission has been extremely limited.

Part 1 – Getting Started

Information the University Publishes

The 2009 SES contains some useful information relating to student views on the information they received from the University prior to starting their course. Overall, students seem to be generally satisfied, with 79.3% stating they were satisfied they had received sufficient information about the University and 72.1% stating they were satisfied they had received sufficient information about the course prior to starting.

However, there are notable differences between different faculties. For example, 81.4% of students in ELSS were satisfied they had received sufficient information about their course prior to arrival as opposed to only 52.5% of students from Birmingham Business School. Perhaps more surprisingly, there is also a variance in levels of satisfaction with the information provided about the University between different faculties, with ELSS students again the most satisfied at 84.3% and Business students again the least satisfied at 68.5%. The Union believes that the University is currently taking steps towards standardising the information that gets sent out to applicants, for example through a working group that the Union has been invited to participate in as well as a more coordinated approach to the 'welcome week' and induction for new students, and welcomes these efforts.

International Students

There was also some disparity in the satisfaction levels with the information received from the University between home, EU and international students, with 70.3% of international students satisfied with the information about the University that they received compared with 80% of home students and 77.8% (45 respondents) of EU students. 60.3% of international students were satisfied with the information about their course compared with 73% for home and 72.7% (44) EU students. Whilst this is not a massive difference, it is still worth considering possible reasons for this. In general international students in the focus groups we held appeared satisfied with the information published by the University before they started their course, although students in one group commented that they had expected more direct contact with the University before they started their studies, including more personal emails or other contacts with staff from their course or school, which may help explain why they appear somewhat less satisfied in this area according to the SES.

Disabled Students

The 2009 SES revealed that disabled students' satisfaction rates with the information they received about the University prior to arrival varied quite considerably, the lowest satisfaction level being 53.3% (15 respondents) for those students with multiple disabilities. When asked about information they received on their course prior to arrival, students with a hearing or sight impairment or multiple disabilities appeared particularly dissatisfied with satisfaction rates of 33.3%(3) and 26.7%(15) respectively.

Part Time Students

The students in our survey were largely satisfied with the information made available to them. They made reference to the website and prospectus but also information received by direct contact with staff through open evenings, drop in sessions and e-mail.

"The pack I got at the beginning of the open day and the booklet about my course was really clear and full of information I needed

to know regarding the course." (Part Time Student; BSc Multimedia Technology, TEE; Union Email Survey)

However, several part time students commented on what they felt was insufficient information about part time study in the prospectus and also commented that some more information on finance would have been appreciated.

The Union's Analysis

The Union decided to carry out its own review of the information provided for prospective students for the purposes of this submission, namely the University prospectuses and website. As detailed in Section 7 of the University's Briefing Paper, in 2009-10 the University switched from having two prospectuses (one covering all undergraduate courses and another covering all postgraduate courses) to a series of prospectuses based on subject areas, most covering both undergraduate and postgraduate courses. In addition, the University also produces the 'Discover: Birmingham City University's Essential Guide', which provides an overview of the University as a whole.

The majority of the prospectuses are structured in the same way, which ensures that each one contains the same essential information. This is presented very clearly and covers all the main issues that prospective students need to consider. Regarding course details, the Union considers that the increased space provided for each course is useful and there are no obvious gaps in information. The Union also notes that it is clear from the University's website that prospectuses can be requested in alternative formats for those who require them, such as Braille or audio format.

The two prospectuses that do not follow the standard format are those for the Conservatoire and Birmingham Institute for Art & Design (BIAD). The information provided in both is nonetheless comprehensive and clear, with the exception being information about fees and funding. This is not as detailed as in other subject prospectuses, and would perhaps benefit from being standardised to avoid confusion for readers. The BIAD document is visually very impressive, which is appropriate given the faculty it is promoting.

Bearing in mind the comments of some part time students expressed above, although details about part time study are included throughout the prospectuses, a specific section about being a part time student may be a useful addition given the large percentage of students at the University who choose that mode of study. Another minor suggestion for improvement is for greater clarity about Equivalent Level Qualifications. Some prospective students may not understand this term when it is used in prospectuses and on the website, so more clarity over exactly what it means and its implications would be beneficial.

In addition to the prospectuses, the information provided to prospective students on the University's new website is generally excellent. It is clear and well presented, with the right amount of content on each page. The video explaining the clearing process is very useful, and this use of video is something worth developing further in future. The different types of courses were clearly explained and an overview of each course programme was provided in most cases. It is very straightforward to order a hard copy of any prospectus or to download it as a PDF.

MINOR RECOMMENDATION 1:

To ensure that all faculties are sending out similar relevant information to all new students regarding the University as a whole, and to seek to share good practice between faculties regarding the information sent out about courses in advance,

including all information sent to international students, and specifically for the Business School to seek to learn what it can do to improve student satisfaction in this area.

MINOR RECOMMENDATION 2:

To consider including more information dedicated specifically to part time study and to clarify what is meant by Equivalent Level Qualifications in future versions of the prospectuses/ University guide.

Arrival and Induction

In general according to the statistics from the 2009 SES students are highly satisfied with the welcome and induction they receive at BCU, with an average overall of 85.8% satisfaction with the welcome received and 76.4% satisfaction with the induction. In some faculties, this satisfaction appears even higher; the Faculty of Health has a 92.2% satisfaction rating with regards to the welcome received from the faculty/ school, and an 85.4% satisfaction rating regarding the induction process provided by the faculty/ school. The Business School and TEE both score lower than the average, with satisfaction levels of just 66.9% and 67.4% for the induction they provide. Whilst this may highlight some concern, it is possible that there is a correlation with the lower satisfaction levels of international students (see below), as these are two faculties with significant numbers of international students. More positively, 89% of Health students and 85.9% of ELSS students were pleased they had made the right decision to study at Birmingham City University.

Was it what students expected?

The Union conducted a short questionnaire with students across several of our campuses, the first question of which was 'What surprised you most about being a student at BCU?' Answers were of course very varied, but there were some common themes that can be identified. The most common answers from students in the Faculty of Health were regarding workload; several commented on the difference in workload between their first and final years of study, whilst others commented more generally that the workload had been greater or harder than they expected. Students in TEE commented frequently on the facilities at their campus, with comments in general reflecting positively on the computer and specialist equipment provision but less positively on the library and books available there. Students in TEE also made several positive comments about the atmosphere at the Millennium Point campus. Students from various faculties and at various campuses made comments about the number of campuses, how small their campus is (comments made by students at all campuses) and how spread out the campuses are. There were also negative comments relating to the atmosphere at Perry Barr campus from students in both Health and ELSS.

1. What surprised you most about being a student at BCU?

"Very relaxed environment, brilliant technological facilities"
(Student; BSc Multimedia Technology, TEE; Union Short Survey)

"In first year there only being one lecture a day, and lots of days off. Now in 3rd year and lots of lectures (6 hrs a day) in one day. Only one day to sort out notes" (Student; DipHE Nursing, Health; Union Short Survey)

"The range of courses it offers, its campuses and the way they spread across the city because I assumed it was on one campus"
(Student; BA Early Childhood Studies, ELSS; Union Short Survey)

"Course is really hard and constant assessment" (Student; BSc Speech and Language Therapy, Health; Union Short Survey)

Whilst these answers are interesting, they certainly don't indicate any particular problems in terms of BCU significantly failing to meet the expectations of students, and indeed many answers indicate students were pleasantly surprised by the experience of studying at BCU from what they had been expecting.

International Students

SES 2009 results indicate there is a difference between the satisfaction of home and international students with regards to their satisfaction with the induction process. The average satisfaction level relating to new students experiences was 76.9% for home students and just 63.4% of international Students (72.5% of EU Students).

Whilst 70.3% of international students were satisfied with the welcome they received from their Faculty and School staff, for home students this was even higher at 87.3%. International student satisfaction was also significantly lower regarding their induction programme, the opportunities provided to make friends and the communication from the University during their first year. Most worryingly, whilst 83.4% of students from the UK and 81.4% (43 respondents) of students from the EU agreed that they were pleased they had made the right decision to come to Birmingham City University, for international students it was only 59.2%.

The Summer 2009 International Student Barometer (ISB) paints a more positive picture, with 79% of international students at Birmingham City University generally satisfied with their arrival at the University, although this is 5% lower than the average for Million+ institutions. Specific areas of concern highlighted by both the Summer and Autumn 2009 ISB include the welcome students receive on first arriving in Birmingham, the first night they spend in Birmingham and their formal welcome from the University.

Students in the focus groups the Union ran felt strongly that it was very important for international students to receive a full induction. Those who had received the full induction felt satisfied that their induction had covered everything they wanted and had been useful, with several students making very positive comments about the process.

Students in both formal focus groups expressed strong concerns about international students who arrive late and miss the induction period, which they attributed to delays in getting visas although the Union notes that in some cases this may be through choice on the part of individual students. Students commented they felt those who missed the induction and/or start of term often had problems getting to grips with enrolment onto their course, and often found they had assignments or exams to complete soon after they arrived that they struggled with as they had not had time to fully understand what was expected of them or where to access support. This is backed up by some comments from the ISB. Some students also felt that having students arriving late and joining the course after it had started was disruptive for the other students on the course, as staff would have to spend time re-iterating things for the new students that had already been covered.

"I think the Orientation programme and activities were very well organised, and really helped me make new friends and settle in sooner." (International Student comment, ISB Autumn 2009)

"My visa was late in arriving, so I missed orientation week. When I arrived, I had to do academic registration and enrolment on my own, and was dissatisfied with the lack of organization during the process. Different offices sent me back and forth, with no one sure what exactly was supposed to happen... Lack of communication between departments and poor management of people made to

enrol late made my arrival to the university much more difficult than it needed to be. (International Student; ISB Autumn 2009)

Whilst the University is not responsible for international student visas or when students choose to arrive at University, the Union suggests that consideration should be given to what provisions can be made to ensure that international students who do arrive late are assimilated into their courses as smoothly as possible and with the minimal possible interruption for students who have already started. Some students suggested that there should be a second brief induction to the University arranged specifically for international students who miss the first one, even if just for one or two days, which could cover information on the library, support services available, basics of studying including plagiarism issues etc.

MINOR RECOMMENDATION 3:

To examine the procedure for inducting international students who do not arrive in time for the main induction, and what changes may be possible to improve the experience both for those students who arrive late and the rest of their cohorts; to examine whether there needs to be a stricter cut-off point for when students can join a course that has already commenced.

Part 2 – Being a Student

Learning and Teaching

The NSS 2009 shows overall satisfaction with “the teaching on my course” to be at 80% with 86% of students satisfied that “staff are good at explaining things”. PME has the course with the highest satisfaction for teaching, BA Acting with 99% satisfaction (35 respondents with 83% response rate). The course with the lowest satisfaction with teaching is in BIAD, BA Fashion Retail Management where satisfaction is 40%. (16 with 76% response rate)

The comments from the NSS relating to both the course with the highest and the lowest satisfaction levels offer some insight into what students viewed as important on their course. It is clear that the teaching staff have a huge impact on the student experience of learning and teaching.

“Extremely dedicated staff, wonderfully caring. ?? is a sheer delight, 10/10 teacher.” (Student; BA Acting, PME; NSS)

“The staff are exceptionally committed to their students. We have constant feedback on our work.” (Student; BA Acting, PME; NSS)

“The enthusiasm of the tutors and their dedication.” (Student; BA Acting, PME; NSS)

“Teachers are not enthusiastic; they don't communicate between each other. More guidance, support and help definitely required.” (Student; BA Fashion Retail Management, BIAD; NSS)

“The management and organisation of the course is bad, teachers and lectures have little knowledge, interest, enthusiasm,...” (Student; BA Fashion Retail Management, BIAD; NSS)

The SES 2009 showed a lower overall satisfaction score of 73.5%. Students were most satisfied that “practical activities on my course have helped me to learn”, a question which isn't asked in the NSS therefore no score is available for comparison. Students at TEE were the least satisfied with teaching, at 61.7%, compared with students in Health being the most satisfied at 81.9%. Overall, the Union is happy that learning and teaching is an area that the University does very well in for the vast majority of our students.

Disabled Students

The SES 2009 shows that students with a hearing or sight impairment were the least satisfied with the teaching on their course, compared with BCU overall and students with other disabilities. Only 27.3% (11 respondents) of these students found that using Moodle had helped them learn whereas 70% (10 respondents) were satisfied that “practical activities on my course have helped me to learn”. The NSS 2009 shows satisfaction levels at 80% for no known disability, 76% for students with dyslexia and 79% for students with other types of disability. It is difficult to compare the NSS scores with the SES scores directly as the categorisation of “disabled” groups is different.

From the small number of disabled students we spoke to, mixed views in relation to learning and teaching were given. Students were asked whether the assessment methods were flexible enough to allow a student to demonstrate their ability. Some students appeared to believe this was the case, however, one

student did comment that they felt their marks had been adversely affected due to delay in adjustments being made to take account of their disability.

"Yes I have been able to achieve my expected levels and outcomes" (Disabled Student; BSc Social Work, Health; Union Email Survey)

When asked about various teaching aids, some students expressed satisfaction that handouts were placed on Moodle in advance of lectures. Two students spoke positively of Moodle as a useful resource but it appears that not all tutors use it to the same degree. One student commented that they'd had issues with the use of PowerPoint in lectures as their specialist software had been unable to read it. The same student had also not been provided with handouts in advance, something which they would have found, "invaluable". Another student explained that their Mental Health Advisor had requested handouts in advance for them, however, they had not materialised.

"Handouts are uploaded on the Intranet, usually a day or two before the lecture. Their current format is relevant although I think the only way they can be improved is the delivery of information; some lecturers deliver the lecture better than others." (Disabled Student; BSc Information and Communications Technology, TEE; Union Email Survey)

International Students

The 2009 ISB reveals that overall international students are satisfied with the learning and teaching at BCU, with 81% satisfaction overall, although this is 5% lower than the average for Million+ institutions (80% overall international student satisfaction in the 2009 NSS for 'the teaching on my course'). There were several very positive student comments from the ISB regarding learning and teaching:

"Learning is very important and having good students and teachers around makes it even better and helpful and Birmingham City University has made it easy for me to achieve my goals in future." (International Student; ISB Autumn 2009)

"The teachers are just so helpful and have great classroom discussions." (International Student; ISB Autumn 2009)

"Birmingham City University provides a very suitable and comfortable environment of learning. The teaching standard is very high." (International Student; ISB Autumn 2009)

Students in the ISB were particularly happy with 'good teachers', 'course content' and 'expert lecturers', all of which they also rated as being very important to them. Interestingly, female international students are on average less satisfied than their male counterparts across every aspect of their learning experience, and 7% less satisfied across learning as a whole.

Students in both formal focus groups identified difficulties in understanding lecturers' English as an area of dissatisfaction in some cases, although this was something they felt could be addressed through provision of lecture notes or handouts being more readily available. Besides from this, students in the focus groups were largely very positive about lectures, although in both groups, students commented that they felt more guest lectures and input from professionals in the relevant industry would be very useful.

Students in one of our focus groups identified large class sizes as a cause for concern for some international students, with participants agreeing that they had been surprised by the ratio of students to teaching staff. There were also comments reflecting concern from international students at what was felt to be a surprisingly low number of contact hours on some courses. These concerns are perhaps unsurprising, and may reflect more on the expectations of some students based on their experiences of education in their home countries. Indeed, there is a feeling from both our focus groups and the ISB that adjusting to the different style of learning and teaching is a key issue for international students. This links back to previous points raised about the information international students receive prior to commencing their course and the induction they receive.

"The learning experience is very different from what I did at my undergraduate level but I am trying hard to understand the learning methods that are used at this university." (International Student; ISB Autumn 2009)

"The learning experience until now has been interesting as well as challenging. The system of education is quite different from what I have experienced in the past, so takes some time to get used to it, especially the fact that right now our lectures are only once a week." (International Student; ISB Autumn 2009)

"I feel like I have too much spare time, only have 2 or 3 classes per week" (International Student; ISB Autumn 2009)

Organisation and Management

The NSS 2009 results reveal that this was one of the areas that students are least satisfied with at BCU, with overall satisfaction standing at 65%. Within the individual NSS questions, satisfaction levels range from 72% with regards to "the timetable works efficiently as far as my activities are concerned" to 60% for "the course is well organised and is running smoothly" and 61% for "any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively".

The NSS 2009 shows that the two lowest ranked courses in terms of satisfaction with Organisation and Management are both from BIAD, BA (Hons) Fashion Retail Management having a satisfaction level of 15% (16 respondents with a 76% response rate) and BA (Hons) Architecture having a satisfaction level of 31%. The highest ranked course was from PME with 90% of students on BA (Hons) Acting being satisfied with organisation and management on their course. (35 respondents with an 83% response rate). Comments from students on these courses suggest that it is often an issue with communication that leaves students dissatisfied.

"It's run very well and every aspect of it has been very well presented in order to the best out of it." (Student; BA Acting, PME; NSS)

"Organisation and communication of briefs and timetables is sometimes poor." (Student; BA Fashion Retail Management, BIAD; NSS)

"Poor management of the course, not enough tutors for students, poor communications, poor lecture lay out and presentation, poor quality of verbal feedback and length of time. It takes for marking work, poor guidance throughout modules, briefs given are long and are not concise enough." (Student; BA Fashion Retail Management, BIAD; NSS)

More general comments from the NSS relating to organisation and management seem to back this up, with positive comments noting that everything was well explained and communicated throughout the course and negative comments highlighting less effective communication.

"Course structure and organisation is smooth and explained well at the beginning of each module, for clear understanding tutors constantly e-mail to keep students informed of new lectures and other events trips for inspiration & future career research." (Student; BA Textile Design, BIAD; NSS)

"Key information does not seem to be communicated effectively such as end of course dates and due dates for assignments." (Student; BSc Midwifery, Health; NSS)

The SES 2009 scores overall are generally similar to those of the NSS scores across this section. Overall satisfaction stands at 63.6%. ELSS has the highest overall satisfaction at 73.7% and also the highest satisfaction across all questions in this section. BIAD has the lowest overall satisfaction at 52% and only 46.2% of its students were satisfied that "the course is well organised and running smoothly". TEE has the second lowest level of overall satisfaction at 57.6%. Comments from these faculties from the NSS again show that lack of timely communication, for example when lectures are cancelled or regarding assignments, once again appear to be the main problem, along with some

students being dissatisfied when things like deadlines or modules have to change.

Disabled Students

The NSS 2009 suggests that disabled students are less satisfied overall with organisation and management than students without a disability, students with a disability (excluding dyslexia) being the least satisfied at 59%. In particular only 49% of students with a disability (excluding dyslexia) were satisfied that "the course is well organised and is running smoothly".

When looking at the SES 2009 only 27.3% (11) of students with a hearing or sight impairment were satisfied that the course that "the course is well-organised and running smoothly". The Union is obviously concerned by the fact that disabled students appear so dissatisfied with organisation and management, however, we are currently unable to comment on the specifics of why this should be. This is an area we feel needs further research to ensure that the University is doing all it can be to make sure disabled students aren't at a disadvantage when it comes to the organisation and management of their courses.

Part time Students

The overall NSS scores for Organisation and Management showed that part time students appeared more satisfied than full time students, 69% for part time compared with 64% for full time. This satisfaction extended to all questions in this section, the most significant difference being between 59% of full time students who were satisfied with the course being well organised and running smoothly and the 70% of part time students who agreed this was the case.

Our own research did however reveal some more negative comments about organisation and management from part-time students. Whilst these should not be taken to invalidate the fact that this area does not appear to be of significant concern to part time students, they are interesting in the issues that they raise. The main area of concern appeared to be a perception that, with regards to timetabling and other administrative arrangements, the needs of full time students were prioritised and these arrangements were not flexible or responsive enough to take account of part time schedules. Examples were given of hand in dates not being on days when the students were in university, having to come in for one lecture on several days rather than attendance being condensed, and exam timetables being provided late. Other students commented on confusions that had arisen when a course had both part time and full time students.

Several suggestions were made by students of ways of improving their experience, for example to increase the use of online submission for assignments, thereby eradicating the need for part-time students to come in on days they are not normally in university. With regards to electronic submission, the faculties are responsible for determining what is the most appropriate form of submission for a particular assessment. It is unclear how widely electronic submission is used, however, where practicable the Union believes this would be beneficial to students, particularly part time students.

"Some confusion still arises when lectures are mixed, with lecturers presuming that we are all at the same level; often FT's have covered areas that PT's are still doing." (Part Time Student; Speech and Language Therapy, Health; Union Email Survey)

"In the units where the part time students are the only students in the group (mainly the evening classes), we are generally given a good level of support however when we are only in the university 1 day a week, a lack of ability to hand in work online and repeated

hand in dates/exams on days when we are not at university does make life difficult in all of the units. (Part Time Student; BSc Information and Communications Technology, TEE; Union Email Survey)

"I have been disappointed that the schedule for part-time students has at times had to be modified to take account of full-time students - for example lecture slides have not always been available in a timely manner on moodle as we were informed that full-time students would download them and not attend lectures. This I find really disappointing" (Part Time Student; LLB Law, ELSS; Union Email Survey)

International Students

The NSS suggests that in general international students are more satisfied overall with organisation and management than the BCU average (71% compared with 65%). When asked about timetabling, one focus group was uniformly happy with their timetabling apart from the issue of number of contact hours, and students commented that they were impressed with how well timetables were organised considering the size of their course.

In the other group, students were less satisfied; stating that the way timetables were organised meant they couldn't structure their time as effectively as they would have wanted. There were also comments expressing dissatisfaction with how late timetables were received, with students commenting that it made it hard for them to organise and maintain part time work when they didn't know what days they would be able to work in the next term. Students in both groups were happy that any changes to their timetable or to the course were communicated effectively. Students also commented positively on the way modules were organised and the different pathways that were available to them, and stated that the provision of the student handbook was very helpful.

MAJOR RECOMMENDATION:

We recognise and welcome that the University is already aware of the issues surrounding student satisfaction with Organisation and Management, and will no doubt already have ideas on how to tackle this. The Union recommends that this be made a clear priority in 2010-11; that efforts are made to learn from the good practice in some courses and faculties and for this to be shared widely with areas that are doing less well; that students are consulted further about how they wish to receive communications from the University regarding the organisation of their course (which the Union would be pleased to work with the University on) and that staff at all levels of the institution are encouraged to get involved in tackling this problem.

MINOR RECOMMENDATION 4:

To consider expanding current provision of electronic submission of coursework, with a particular view on how this could be beneficial to part time students across the University.

Knowing how to Succeed

In terms of students knowing what they need to do in order to succeed one of the biggest issues is feedback on assessment. It is clear from the NSS that both nationally and locally this is an area where students are least satisfied in terms of their academic experiences. At Birmingham City University, the NSS scores 2009 show that Assessment and Feedback was, along with Organisation and Management, one of the two lowest ranking areas in the NSS with just 65% satisfaction. Whilst 65% is the sector wide average in this area, it is still an area for concern that so many students remain unsatisfied with the feedback they receive. The SES 2009 results are similar, with a 63.8% satisfaction overall with Assessment and Feedback.

Within the individual NSS questions, satisfaction levels range from 74% with regards to 'the criteria used in marking have been clear in advance' to just 57% for 'feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand' and 59% for 'feedback on my work has been prompt'. 67% were in agreement that 'assessment arrangements and marking have been fair' and 66% agreed with the statement 'I have received detailed comments on my work'. The SES scores overall are generally similar or slightly lower than the NSS scores across this section. However, looking at the different scores within different faculties there are some notable differences.

Overall within this section, ELSS scored best with 72.8% satisfaction, compared with just 56.1% in Business and 53.6% in TEE. Indeed, the ELSS scores are generally speaking much higher than average across all individual questions, and Health and PME both have several scores around or above 70% satisfaction within this section. TEE and Business in general are areas of more concern, with both having scores below 50%, and indeed only 39.9% of students in TEE agreed that 'feedback on my work has been prompt at the time stated'.

Feedback is mentioned a lot in the comments from the NSS, with comments from students studying across all faculties highlighting concerns students have with feedback, from it not being detailed enough to not being timely and handwritten comments not being legible. However, there are also some very positive comments from students on some courses, indicating that some staff are definitely getting it right.

"Feedback on work was good. There was help from lecturers if you need it." (Student; BA Business and Management, BCBS; NSS)

"The staff are exceptionally committed to their students. We have constant feedback on our work." (Student; BA Acting, PME; NSS)

"Results are rarely in the 4-week time slot. Feedback is not that detailed." (Student; BSc Speech and Language Therapy, Health; NSS)

"Feedback has just been generally poor. Feedback from my work has come back late which has resulted in me being behind in some of my modules because my work depends on feedback." (Student; BSc CBEsT, TEE; NSS)

"The feedback on coursework was not anywhere as detailed as need, and half the time you can't read the writing anyway. The feedback should be more helpful and critical." (Student; LLB, ELSS; NSS)

It is clear from looking at Faculty Management Plans outlining each faculty's response to the SES and NSS that there have been some ongoing issues with feedback, both in terms of promptness and clarity. It is also clear from a University paper dating back to 2004 (Pilot Academic Audit of Faculty Arrangements for Providing Feedback on Assessed Work) that the University has made attempts in the past to respond to issues surrounding feedback. The University's Briefing Paper states that the standard is for feedback on assessments to be provided within 20 working days. The Union is aware of examples of students experiencing significant delay with this on occasion and would urge the University to ensure that faculties are adhering to the University's own quality assurance guidelines.

Disabled Students

The satisfaction levels of disabled students in the NSS 2009 were comparable to, if slightly lower, than those students without a disability. In the SES 2009 hearing or sight impaired students were the least satisfied of the disabled students, only 9.1% (11) agreed that "feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand" with the BCU overall rate standing at 54.4%. When asked whether they were satisfied that "assessment arrangements and marking have been fair", 18.2% (11) were satisfied whereas for Birmingham City overall the rate was 66.3%. Again, this is an area where more research is needed as to why these students are so dissatisfied.

International Students

In both the NSS and SES international students were more satisfied with Assessment and Feedback than the BCU average. In general, the international students in the focus groups felt that it took them a while to get to grips with the assessment criteria being used. Both groups agreed that it took at least a term before they understood fully what was being asked of them when they completed an assessment. Some felt this was reasonable as they got to grips with studying in England but there was also some feeling that this was due to staff not taking enough time to explain the criteria for assessment. It was generally agreed once again that students who were present for the full induction were better prepared for knowing how to succeed than those who missed it. In one group, further comments were made that lecturers were good at explaining what was needed to achieve a basic pass mark, but that students were not given guidance on how to achieve the highest marks.

"Sometimes it's not exactly clear what they are looking for"
(International Student, Union Focus Group)

Students commented positively about some tutors who they could bring draft sections of essays to and get feedback on before the deadline. There was also positive feedback about central services for international students where students could get support with their written English for assignments, although a couple of students felt that there wasn't enough help provided with regards to researching assignments.

With regards to feedback on assessments, there were mixed responses from both groups. Some students commented positively that the feedback they had received had been very helpful in letting them know what they needed to do in order to improve. Other students were frustrated that several weeks had gone by since they handed in their first assessment and they had not yet received any feedback.

Students in both groups commented that they would like feedback on exams as well as essays, with one student commenting specifically about students who had

failed exams they had been expecting to pass, and not having any way of knowing what it was they had done wrong. The Union understands that the University has a policy that feedback on exams is available to students if they request it; we believe this needs to be publicised much more widely to ensure all students are aware that they are able to request this.

Improvements in Assessment and Feedback (Case Study)

Whilst overall the statistics and feedback from the focus groups show that a significant proportion of students from across BCU remain dissatisfied with the feedback they get on assessment, the Union is aware of various initiatives across the University that are seeking to make improvements.

One such example is the engagement of students with feedback in the first assignment on the FdA/BA/BA Hons Professional Housing Studies course within the faculty of ELSS. Students are given a detailed description of the task, the assessment criteria and the hand in and return dates for this assignment. Once the work is handed in, it is marked and then moderated anonymously by members of the teaching staff. The work is then returned to the students, but without the actual mark, just with the comments and the assessment criteria. Students are then asked to provide the grade that they think they have achieved, based on the comments provided, as well as filling out a short reflection on how they will use the feedback provided going forward. These are returned to the tutor, who then compares the grades the students gave themselves with the original grades from the tutor.

Providing the student grade is within 5 marks of that awarded by the tutor, the student is given the higher of the two marks. This is intended to motivate the students to fully understand how to interpret the assessment criteria and feedback they receive from the tutor. Should a student mark be outside the 5 marks range, an appointment is made for the tutor and student to meet and discuss the marks received and the reason for the difference between the two. In the pilot of this arrangement during the 09-10 academic year, only one student from the cohort had given themselves a mark outside of the 5 mark range. The student still received their final grade within the standard 20 day turn-around time.

"I feel that this exercise helped me settle into university, as I was a little anxious to begin with. It has helped me to fully understand the marking process and it has improved my understanding of the assessment criteria. I feel without this exercise it would have taken a little longer to settle and the exercise helped improve my confidence when approaching and researching my assignments"

(Student; BA Professional Housing Studies, ELSS; Email)

"I do recall the exercise. It was very helpful in giving me an understanding of how work is assessed and taught me how to check my work against the assessment criteria for subsequent assignments.... When assignments are returned back I now have a better understanding of why I have received the mark I have."

(Part Time Student; FdA Professional Housing Studies, ELSS; Email)

The Union believes that this kind of initiative has the potential to greatly improve the way students respond to assessment and feedback, and commends the staff concerned. We further believe that this kind of initiative should be shared and staff from other courses across the University urged to develop similar models wherever appropriate.

MAJOR RECOMMENDATION:

The Union is confident that the University is already aware of the issues surrounding student satisfaction with feedback and assessment. However, we recommend that stronger measures need to be taken to ensure that staff are aware of what is reasonable for students to expect from them, in terms of both timing and quality of feedback on assessment. The Union will undertake to carry out further research into students' understanding and expectations of feedback. The Union urges the 20 day turnaround time to be mandated more strongly throughout the University; further, the University should make reference to NUS guides on best practice on feedback, and seek to disseminate and share more widely existing examples of good practice around assessment and feedback and encourage the greater application of existing innovations.

MINOR RECOMMENDATION 5:

The Union and University to work together to raise awareness among all students at Birmingham City University of the fact that they are able to request feedback on exams.

Facilities

In general, satisfaction with learning resources at BCU is high, with an 80% score overall in the NSS and a 76.7% score in the SES. In the NSS 2009, 82% were satisfied with the statement 'The library resources and services are good enough for my need' and 84% with the statement 'I have been able to access general IT resources when I needed to'. This drops to 73% for the statement 'I have been able to access specialised equipment, facilities or rooms when I needed to'. The SES includes the further statement 'The university provides an appropriate environment in which to learn', which 79.8% of students agreed with overall. There were positive comments on facilities in the NSS from a range of courses across the University.

"Excellent facilities and experienced lecturers on the whole. A wide range of techniques taught." (Student; BTEC HND Jewellery and Silversmithing, BIAD; NSS)

"The facilities that are available have been very good. There is a wide range of computers in the building.." (Student; BA Primary Education with QTS, ELSS; NSS)

"Great campus and facilities." (Student; BSc Nursing RN, Health; NSS)

When looking at the faculty breakdown provided by the SES, Health scores highest with an average of 84.5% and 87.6% for the 'appropriate environment in which to learn', presumably reflecting high student satisfaction with the facilities at the City South campus where the majority of Health courses are taught. BIAD is the faculty which scored least high across this section of the SES, with an average of 67.3%. Of particular concern, the statement 'I have been able to access specialised equipment, facilities or rooms when I needed to' has scores of just 59.5% for BIAD and PME and 59.7% for TEE, indicating that students on some of the courses within these faculties are perhaps less happy with the specialised facilities on offer.

The following comments from the NSS give an illustration of the issues students face on the specific courses with the lowest levels of satisfaction with access to specialised equipment, facilities or rooms: BA Architecture with 17% (24 respondents with a 65% response rate), BA Interior Design with 30% (20 respondents with a 67% response rate) and BMus with 41% (62 respondents with a 71% response rate).

"Seriously deficient in ICT facilities, which poses continual problems, and has been a constant point of contention." (Student; Architecture, BIAD; NSS)

"The specialised facilities available have been very limited since the course relocated to Gosta Green, although this is being rectified this year. The newly installed centralised printing system is inefficient and often needs repairs, preventing students from printing or photocopying. The opening hours for the building at Costa Green are limited meaning that the students cannot use the library and studios after 7 pm." (Student; Architecture, BIAD; NSS)

"Not enough computers and printing facilities in uni. Library is not that good and only a few computers have specified programmes." (Student; BA Interior Design, BIAD; NSS)

"The fact that the facilities are insufficient for the number of students, with reference to the practice rooms available. The top floor ones are meant to change over at the hour, and the others on the half yet people are queuing an hour in advance in most cases for rooms. It's ridiculous yet there are more and more students being taken in each year." (Student; BMus, PME; NSS)

"Not enough space to practice means that even if you have over an hour-and-a-half spare you can still not get a room. I get in between 8:00 and 9:00 in the morning, and leave between 9:00 and 10:00 at night and never manage to get enough practice that the course requires. The situation is having a very detrimental effect on majority of the students' abilities." (Student; BMus, PME; NSS)

These are areas for concern, as these are courses where specialist facilities are of particular importance in allowing students to succeed. However, the University's plans to build a new campus for BIAD students currently at Gosta Green indicate that the University is looking to rectify these issues and provide better facilities for some of the above courses when it can. Of more concern are the low scores for music students at the Conservatoire, and anecdotal feedback from students and the NSS comments above make clear this is an issue which has got worse as the number of students has increased. The Union recognises that this is a difficult issue to solve, but urges the University to examine ways the current situation may be able to be improved.

With regards to the libraries, although the NSS and SES scores show high levels of satisfaction (82% and 80.5% respectively), in the additional research the Union did, when students were asked what one thing they would change about their academic experience at BCU, the most common response (around 25% of the total) was something relating to library or IT resources. These were around three main issues; firstly, students wanting longer opening hours and/or longer loan times, particularly at Millennium Point (indeed, TEE scored lowest for satisfaction with the library in the SES at 76.9%). Secondly, students wanted more and better resources available at the libraries, including books, computers, journals and online resources. Finally, students commented about wanting the libraries to be quieter and more work-focussed spaces. The Union finds it surprising that something that scores so highly on the NSS and SES is the focus of so many comments; it may be that whilst students are satisfied in general with the provision of the library, students are aware of areas that could be improved.

2. If you could change one thing about the academic experience at Birmingham City University, what would it be? (For example, anything in relation to lectures, the library, feedback on assessment etc – not issues relating to car parking or the canteens.)

"More books available for our course in the library (sometimes it'll be an essential book and there will only be about 20 copies between 80 of us)" (Student; Speech and Language Therapy, Health; Union Short Survey)

"Library times especially TEE. Saturdays should be extended."
(Student; ICT, TEE; Union Short Survey)

"The library does not have enough computers to work on, and the ones they do have are used by people socially" (Student; Early Childhood Studies, ELSS; Union Short Survey)

"The library seems to be a place to hang around and eat for lots of students, they even bring in take away pizzas etc - not a place for learning, so this makes it more difficult to work." (Student; Speech and Language Therapy, Health; Union Short Survey)

The Union believes that the most significant issue that may need addressing is the atmosphere within the libraries, which was also a particular concern to international students (please see below).

Disabled Students

NSS 2009 results reveal that, whilst disabled students are less satisfied than other students with learning resources, it is students with disabilities other than dyslexia who make up the least satisfied group in all questions. Whilst satisfaction with access to specialised equipment, facilities and rooms had a lower level of satisfaction across the board there was a 9% difference in satisfaction between those without a disability at 73% and those with a disability (excl dyslexia) at 64%.

The SES 2009 provides a more varied picture with, for example, those with a hearing or sight impairment being the least satisfied with the library, students with multiple disabilities being least satisfied with access to general IT and those with specific learning difficulties being least satisfied with specialised equipment, facilities and rooms. On a positive note some disabled groups were more satisfied with learning resources than those without a disability.

The disabled students we spoke with gave mixed responses to the questions about facilities, specialist and general, some respondents appearing more satisfied than others. The library and its staff were commented upon positively whilst other resources provoked more negative comment. One student referred to the printing system being confusing whilst another stated that IT support was not particularly good. One student had been frustrated at a perceived lack of specialist software which he had been led to expect would be available. Whilst the software was loaded on some machines the technicians did not know which ones. Other specialist software was provided but was limited in availability.

"Yes they are (suitable) especially as there are extended options for lending library books." (Disabled Student; Social Work, Health; Union Email Survey)

"I feel there is a greater need for Library staff to be more aware of students with a sight problem and offer assistance when asked." (Disabled Student; CertHE/DipHE Rehabilitation Work (Visual Impairment), Health; NSS)

Part Time Students

NSS 2009 data reveals that part time students were more satisfied overall with learning resources than full time students. Whilst 80% of full time students were satisfied overall 84% of part time students expressed satisfaction. 82% of full time students were satisfied with the library resources and for part time students this was even higher at 85%. There was a larger gap in satisfaction with access to general IT with 93% of part time students stating they were satisfied compared with 84% of full time students. In the area of access to specialised

equipment part time students were slightly less satisfied, 71% satisfaction for part time students and 73% satisfaction for full time.

The Part Time Survey responses indicated a large degree of satisfaction with facilities and resources. Students were largely happy with the library both in terms of resources and as a learning space, however, as with other students, several comments were made about noise levels in the library.

"The main library is a very good facility." (Part Time Student; Estates Management, TEE; Union Email Survey)

"The library has been really useful in completing assignments, i especially like the high demand section as you know you can access the texts there. A fantastic range of journals and the online material (lexisnexis,westlaw, UCEEL etc) have been a great help." (Part Time Student; LLB Law, ELSS; Union Email Survey)

"The library can be very noisy and no effort is made by the staff to keep the noise level down." (Part Time Student; BEng Mechanical Engineering, TEE; Union Email Survey)

Moodle and online resources were, in the main, viewed positively. It is fair to assume that some part-time students probably rely more on them than full-time students because they are unable to spend a great deal of time in the library. Any disruption to provision or insufficiencies did generate frustration as did IT resources integral to a module not being available outside of the university

"There have been occasions I have been unable to access online resources at times when I needed them..... the database system that we had to work with was not even available to us outside of the university meaning that I was not able to do any work on the subject outside of the 12 (or so) hours that I was on campus." (Part Time Student; BSc Information and Communications Technology, TEE; Union Email Survey)

Several concerns were expressed about the printing system and the availability of computers which may point to wider issues also experienced by full time students. This extended to students being frustrated at making special arrangements to come in to university to use facilities only to find that they were already in use, despite not showing on the system as being booked.

International Students

In the 2009 ISB, the library scored particularly highly for international student satisfaction, at 86%. The overall score for technology was 83%, and for learning spaces it was 79%. The main issue relating to facilities that international students commented on was regarding internet access in halls, and the Union understands that this has been addressed by the University and changes have been made ready for the 2010-11 academic year. Otherwise, there were both positive and negative comments about the learning environment and resources.

"Generally the studying environment is very good. The Learning facilities are adequate and suitable for learning." (International Student; ISB Autumn 2009)

"So far it's been alright, however the classrooms are a bit small and uncomfortable. Access to the computer network took 2 weeks to resolve." (International Student; ISB Autumn 2009)

International students in the focus groups gave mixed comments regarding the facilities. One group was very positive about the resources available, with several students commenting that the library was much better than they had been expecting. Students in this group commented positively that there were enough books available and there was good access to online materials. Students in the other group were less positive, with students picking up on similar issues as those revealed in the Union's additional research survey above. Students complained specifically that the library at Millennium Point did not have enough copies of books and that learning materials weren't updated often enough. Further comments were made that improvements should be made to online access to journal articles. Another student felt that more computers should be made available for students.

Whilst students in both groups were happy that spaces were provided for group work, there were also negative comments about the library being too crowded and noisy. Students in one group felt strongly that the noise levels in the library made it particularly difficult for international students who were trying to read, commenting that it was hard enough for international students to read in a language that wasn't their first language without needing to also contend with high noise levels and distractions from students in the library but not focussing on studying.

The Union believes this is an issue which the University's library services should be looking into, as there has been further anecdotal evidence that this is something that students are unhappy with. Whilst it is a difficult balance to strike, the Union would welcome further research into what solutions students would wish to see to ensure that all students are able to use the library effectively.

MINOR RECOMMENDATION 6:

The Faculty of PME, if it hasn't already, should investigate the issues highlighted by students around the issue of practice space, and innovative solutions should be sought incorporating the input of students and potentially looking for facilities outside of the immediate Conservatoire campus if it is felt these would be beneficial to students.

MINOR RECOMMENDATION 7:

To look at what can be done to better manage the way the University's libraries are used by students, to focus on ensuring that those who need a place for quiet study are able to access this when they need to. The Union will endeavour to work with library staff to find ways we can support the libraries to address this issue.

Support

In general, satisfaction with support at BCU is reasonable, with a 72% score overall in the NSS and a 68.7% score in the SES 2009. In the NSS 2009, 76% were satisfied with the statement 'I have been able to contact staff when I have needed to' and 71% were satisfied that they had "received sufficient advice and support with studies". This falls to 68% for the statement "Good advice was available when I needed to make study choices". When looking at the faculty breakdown provided by the SES, Health scores highest with an average of 75.3%. BIAD is the faculty which scored the lowest across this section of the SES, with an average of 60.3%. Comments on support from the NSS include some very positive ones relating to support received from staff, with more negative comments focussing on a lack of support from personal tutors in particular.

"The third year has been really good, with good support and tutor advice when you need it." (Student; BA Jewellery and Silversmithing, BIAD; NSS)

"Most of the teachers have been extremely supportive to my needs, which has given me direction and on what to do next or improve for the completion of my assignments." (Student; BA Marketing and PR, BCBS; NSS)

"The staff are exceptionally supportive and having a personal tutor who is so approachable is really beneficial." (Student; BA Primary Ed QTS, ELSS; NSS)

"E-mails that I've sent to my personal tutor and have not been replied to only until action was taken, I sent a complaint, then replied." (Student; BSc CBEsT, TEE; NSS)

"No personal tutor contact for 2 years whilst on placement." (Student; BSc Diagnostic Radiography, Health; NSS)

Disabled Students

When speaking to disabled students through interview or our email survey it appeared their experiences had largely been positive ones although there had been some issues with the speed at which support systems were set in place. Often the problems disabled students have faced appear to have been the result of individual error or miscommunication rather than systematic failings. One student commented they had had to chase up the relevant departments. This same student also commented that they felt they had not been encouraged to disclose their disability at an early stage.

"My personal tutor was the person who introduced me to availability of help through MHA. Once I approached Student services, they were exceptionally helpful." (Disabled Student; BA English Literature, PME; Union Email Survey)

"Throughout the disability support advisor, my mentor, course staff and also occupational health I have been supported in any information I needed." (Disabled Student; BSc Social Work, Health; Union Email Survey)

"After the support statement was made, the support itself took a few months to begin, I had to make many enquires to ensure I got the correct support, although when the following academic year

began, all support was in place.“(Disabled Student; BSc Information and Communications Technology, TEE; Union Email Survey)

Respondents spoke very positively of their experiences of the support made available to them, not just from staff with specific responsibility for disability support. Several comments were made about staff being accommodating and recognising when adjustments needed to be made in order to help a student. Students also spoke of receiving support from a variety of sources and it appears from their comments that they were able to access the relevant services with little difficulty.

Similarly positive comments can be found in the NSS. However, a couple of students commented in the NSS 2009 on attending placements as a disabled student. One student had faced difficulties on placement, largely due to lack of information being provided by the University, whilst another student suggested a pre-placement meeting should be held between the placement and the University in order to ensure the correct support was in place.

“The university has a very positive attitude towards my disability, ensuring I am aware of access to extra support if I wish to use it and allowing the use of aids in lectures. The schedule of regular meetings with my personal tutor has allowed a relationship to develop in which I feel comfortable to discuss issues and they are able to constructively criticise my progress.” (Disabled Student; Dip HE Nursing (Adult), Health; NSS)

“I feel that all students should have a pre placement meeting with BCU staff and placement tutors in order for students needs to be addressed especially if the student has a disability. I also feel that the needs of students with a visual impairment should have access to computers with assistance technology appropriate to the individuals learning needs in the faculty computer rooms.” (Disabled Student; CertHE/DipHE Rehabilitation Work (Visual Impairment), Health; NSS)

One student we spoke to had a less satisfactory experience. He praised highly his personal tutor for the lengths he went to offer support, and spoke positively about Disability Services. He did, however, feel that it appeared some academic staff had not been provided with the relevant information to make accommodations for his specific disability. This same student suggested that lecturers could be provided with the same or similar synopsis document that Student Services provide for support workers, as a useful way of communicating a student’s needs.

Part time students

The NSS 2009 showed that part time student satisfaction with all areas of academic support declined compared with 2008. Part time students were still more satisfied than full time students with the ability to contact staff when needed (PT 77%, FT 76%) and good advice being available when students needed to make study choices (PT 71%, FT 68%). They were less satisfied with having received sufficient advice and support with their studies (PT 65%, FT 71%).

Students in our survey commented both positively and negatively on these areas. Students who made negative comments focused on the fact that often the support systems such as skills workshops, IT support and access to course staff

and faculty office were geared to full time attendance or relied on students having the time, whilst in university, to seek out staff.

"Support seems to be readily available, all teaching staff and technicians that I have come into contact with have been very willing to help however they can." (Part Time Student; Foundation in Art and Design, BIAD; Union Email Survey)

"The academic skill workshops are very difficult to attend the day for most part-time students. I have also been trying to get to see ASK (Student Services) but I struggle to get there before 5pm." (Part Time Student; LLB Law, ELSS; Union Email Survey)

International Students

In general, according to the 2009 ISB there were fairly high levels of satisfaction with support services including the International Office, IT support, international advisory service and the graduate school (84%, 87%, 84% and 94% respectively) although all were lower than the Million+ average. International students were more satisfied with support overall than BCU students in general according to the NSS. International students from both focus groups expressed the feeling that they knew where they could go to access support services, and most students were satisfied with the support that was available, with a couple of students very enthusiastic about support they had received. However, there were also comments about students not being sure which was the most appropriate service to use for different kinds of help required, and a feeling that different support services did not always communicate with each other enough, meaning students would sometimes be passed on several times before they managed to find the appropriate person to talk to.

According to the ISB, students were less satisfied with language support, with satisfaction on average of 77%. However, students in our focus groups expressed particular satisfaction with the support available for improving their English, citing the availability of free language classes. It was suggested that tutors could help students by suggesting which students might benefit the most from attending these classes, possibly through carrying out language assessments at the beginning of the course, as some students present said they had been unsure whether or not they should attend these classes.

Exceptional Circumstances

During 2008/09 the University reviewed the exceptional circumstances (EC) procedures and the regulations governing coursework extensions. Up until 2009/10 claims were submitted by students after the examination board published the results for the assessment in question but from 2009/10 onwards all students have been required to submit requests prior to the relevant assessment. If a student takes an assessment or submits an item of coursework they are deemed "fit" and cannot usually subsequently claim that poor performance was due to exceptional circumstances. The Students' Union expressed reservations about this change at the time.

We would agree with the University (as stated in the Briefing Paper) that there have been some positive outcomes following the new EC procedures. We think it is helpful for students that the system is much faster and the fact that a student is given an answer before the assessment date is useful. However, for some students this current system has resulted in significant problems. The Union's Advice Centre has seen cases where students have had compelling personal circumstances which have not been acknowledged because they attempted the

assessment. The new system benefits students with insight into their personal difficulties but penalises those who would prefer to “give the assessment a go.”

If a student cannot provide evidence to explain why they attempted the assessment and did not claim earlier, their claim is turned down – no matter how compelling their personal circumstances are. Under the previous system they would have been able to claim and if they had genuine difficulties and evidence to support the circumstances then they would have been given a further opportunity. The old system provided much more of a safety net for vulnerable groups and the opportunity of a further chance has been lost. The changes to the procedure also resulted in some students starting under one system and then changing to the other. It is a significant culture change from the previous rules and some students have been caught out by this.

Financial Support

Finances are an important aspect of student life, and although not directly an academic issue finances can affect a student’s academic prospects. A national survey published in March 2010 found that a quarter of students have to work alongside their studies, and the same survey noted that 46% of those who have considered dropping out cited financial problems as the reason.¹ Another survey of 1000 students earlier this year found that 21% found it difficult to submit work by the deadline because they needed to work part time to support themselves, while 17% said that they had to prioritise their part time jobs over lectures.²

The 2009 NSS results do not suggest there is any notable variation in levels of satisfaction at BCU based upon a student’s socio-economic background under any of the headings, which is reassuring. Nonetheless, anecdotal evidence from a few sources suggests that some students have academic problems linked to finance. A number of comments from the NSS refer to financial problems, in particular from students on various nursing courses. These focussed on two main aspects, the first being the detrimental effect that financial pressures had on their studies, and the second being problems they had trying to get financial advice and support from the University.

There is also anecdotal evidence to suggest that the additional cost of course materials is a problem, especially for arts students. The issue has often been raised in conversations that Union representatives have had with BIAD students in recent years. Final year students have been unhappy at having to raise the money for their end of year shows themselves, while others have struggled with the cost of everyday materials. There was one alarming case of a Fine Art student who was unable to do any work for two weeks because he could not afford to buy the materials he needed.

The Union recognises that effort is made by the University to make students aware of potential extra costs before they start their courses (for example at open days). Financial support is also available from the University in the form of bursaries and hardship funds. To encourage widening participation, the Office for Fair Access (OFFA) recommends that institutions make prospective students aware of bursaries and other financial support at the pre-application stage, and the University does strive to do this. Details about bursaries and other support are included in most prospectuses, on the website and in talks by Student Services staff during open days.

The bursary provided by the University is up to £525 per year for OFFA-countable students, which is higher than the minimum required by the government (£329).

¹ Source: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/money/2010/mar/18/university-students-graduate-mouing-debts>

² Source: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/8449307.stm>

However, this is well below the average spend on bursaries and scholarships for institutions in the Million+ Group (£726) and even further below the overall average for English universities (£879). This is an area that the Union feels could be reviewed, given that OFFA figures suggest that Birmingham City University is one of the few institutions to have underspent on bursaries, scholarships and outreach in recent years.³ Other bursaries and scholarships are offered to international students, including country specific bursaries to students from Africa, South East Asia and South Asia and a 15% loyalty discount to international graduates who progress to further study at the University.

MINOR RECOMMENDATION 8:

For the University to consider, when reviewing the EC claims system, whether additional provision needs to be made for those students who, with justifiable reason, attempt assessments and then afterwards wish to submit a claim for EC. The aim of any additional provision should be to ensure that vulnerable students are not disadvantaged by too great an emphasis being placed on whether or not they took the assessment rather than the actual circumstances behind their claim.

³ Source: <http://www.offa.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/OFFAs-Monitoring-outcomes-report-for-2008-09.pdf>

Part 3 – The Student Voice

Feedback from Students

According to the NSS (optional bank of questions), the overall BCU satisfaction level for 'Feedback from Students' is just 54%. In the 2009 SES satisfaction with 'Feedback from Students' is even lower at just 50.5% with a significant variance between faculties, with a score of 58.5% for Health and just 38.9% in Birmingham City Business School. Looking at the JACS subject areas in the NSS, areas that scored particularly highly in this section were 'Others in creative arts and design' with 80% (10 respondents), Aural and Oral Sciences with 73% (36 respondents) and Drama with 70% (41 respondents). Low scoring subject areas include Law at 29% (64 respondents), Building at 29% (14 respondents) and Politics at 32% (27 respondents).

More positively and in contrast to the NSS and SES, when students were asked specifically about the student representation system as part of the Students' Union's Annual Survey in 2008/09, 73% responded with either 'Good' or 'Satisfactory' to the question 'How effective do you think the Student Rep system is in dealing with issues you raise about your course?' There were also some positive comments regarding student feedback in the NSS, as well as more negative ones.

"The course directors do take on board comments made by student representatives, and make changes for the next cohort of students." (Student; Grad Dip Nursing, Health; NSS)

"Comments made by previous years have not been taken into consideration and it is probably fair to say that the same will happen with this survey." (Student; NSS)

"The complaints channels need to be made clearer to students to voice concerns before it is too late." (Student; NSS)

"As a rep I find it extremely frustrating that many of the points we raise on behalf of students (especially in relation to uni facilities) are not listened to or acted upon and the same concerns are raised over and over again. I feel like we actually have no power, that our hands are tied!" (Student; Union Annual Survey 2008)

With regards to the specific questions in this section of the NSS, the statement that scored highest was 'I have had adequate opportunities to provide feedback on all elements of my course' at 71% (61% in the SES). The two other statements 'My feedback on the course is listened to and valued' and 'It is clear to me how students' comments on the course have been acted upon' scored much lower at 47% and 42% respectively, with very similar scores in the SES. This indicates that the main issue is less that students feel they don't have a voice, but rather that they feel the student voice is ignored and not acted upon.

Further information on students' perceptions on student feedback comes from one of the questions in the Union's short research survey which was designed specifically to ask students how they would go about raising an issue to get something changed at the University. 114 students answered the question, of whom only 12 actually mentioned the formal student representation arrangements (either student or course representatives or Boards of Studies meetings). The most popular answer was speaking directly to course staff,

lecturers or personal tutors, with 48 students answering along those lines. Of concern is that so few students thought of the student representation system when considering how to raise a concern; however, more positive is the indication that many students feel positively about their relationship with teaching staff and that they are able to directly raise issues themselves without needing an intermediary.

In the same research survey, 54 of the total 185 respondents were able to cite changes made to their course as a result of student feedback. These covered a very wide range of issues, including the library service, changes to course and module content, deadlines for assessments being spaced better, feedback on assessments improving, better provision of equipment and facilities and changes to rules governing group work and assessment.

4. Since you started your course, have you been aware of any changes being made in relation to issues that students have complained about?

"More use of Moodle/uceel for text/article access" (Student; BSc Speech and Language Therapy, Health; Union Short Survey)

"Yes, a lot of us students complained about too much work in a ridiculous amount of time so they put the deadline back" (Student; BA Fashion Design, BIAD; Union Short Survey)

"Feedback on assessments has improved." (Student; BA Media and Communications, PME; Union Short Survey)

"Certain sessions have been included in the module, following the suggestions of students, eg. Death" (Student; Grad Dip Nursing, Health; Union Short Survey)

The Union believes that it is a good sign students can cite so many different areas of their academic experiences where student feedback has had a positive impact. However, the fact that only 29% of respondents to the research survey responded positively to the above question again suggests that a number of students remain unconvinced their feedback makes a difference. The University has tried to address this issue through a working group looking at feedback from students, as a result of which a 'living log' system has been trialled in the Business School, allowing all students to see both the issues that students are raising and the responses from course staff, and if an evaluation of this pilot demonstrates it has been successful, it is anticipated this will be rolled out across the rest of the University.

Part Time Students

According to the NSS (optional bank of questions), part time students are more satisfied than full time students in the section 'Feedback from Students'. The overall score for part time students is 60% (28 respondents with an 11% response rate) whilst for full time students it's 53%

Our Part Time Survey asked whether students felt their voice was listened to by the institution. The responses were mixed with a number of students stating that they had never needed to raise any issues with the institution. A sizeable group of respondents were very positive that course staff and student reps listened and acted upon their comments whilst others felt that nothing happened as a result of them raising an issue. Whilst some part time students commented that they did not feel their concerns were acted upon most of these did not appear to believe that this was a result of their mode of study.

"I feel that the student rep listens to my view and feeds this back through the channels and we do receive feedback" (Part Time Student; LLB Law, ELSS; Union Email Survey)

"I have regularly asked tutors for dates to be moved to no avail..... This has happened regularly throughout the course." (Part Time Student; BSc Information and Communications Technology, TEE; Union Email Survey)

"Sometimes after a few complaints some temporary changes occur for a short while" (Part Time Student; BEng Electronics, TEE; Union Email Survey)

Disabled Students

3 out of the 4 disabled students we spoke to were aware of the course rep system and one had also been a rep in the past. They were mainly positive that their views were listened to by the University and that reps did raise issues of concern. The one student who was unaware of the rep system felt there should be a specific rep for disabled students.

According to the SES 2009 satisfaction level for 'Feedback from Students' is just 12.1% for students with a hearing or sight impairment. As with other findings, whilst the overall satisfaction level was low, it was in the areas of how the feedback was acted upon and whether it was listened to that provided the least satisfaction, 9.1% in both cases. (11 respondents). In the NSS 2009, as with other groups of students satisfaction is higher with opportunities for feedback, than it is for "feedback on the course being listened to and valued" or how students "comments have been acted upon".

International Students

Again, international students appeared slightly more satisfied than other students according to the NSS at 60%. The international student focus groups gave mixed responses to questions regarding student feedback. In general, the students were pleased with the relationships they had with staff, and felt that tutors were good at responding to informal feedback. Positively, students in one group were aware of several initiatives by members of staff including one of the Associate Deans of the Business School that aimed to allow students to have their voices heard within the faculty. However, international students in both groups were less satisfied with the formal student representative system, with many of the students not being sure who their reps were and other students saying that they knew who the reps were but hadn't been aware of them actually doing anything. Students in both groups felt that the University was better at seeking feedback than at acting on it. One group gave the example of module evaluation forms being given out too late in the module to allow for anything to change for the current cohort, and doubt was expressed that the feedback given on the forms would make a difference to the next cohort of students to sit the module.

"They will listen to it but I am not sure if they will act on it. But yes, I can – through email, or personally, directly, if I want to pass on a message I can do that but I am not sure if anyone will respond to it." (International Student; Focus Group)

The Student Representation System

The Union recognises that students not being aware of how their feedback is acted on does not necessarily mean that the feedback is ignored by the University, but remains concerned that this is an area where significant work is required on both the part of the University and the Students' Union in order to improve student satisfaction in this area. The Union and University work in partnership to run a Student Representation System, which is one of the main ways that feedback from students is captured and acted upon. Student representation at Birmingham City University is currently structured according to a Code of Practice that was developed by the Students' Union and endorsed by the University's Committee for Academic Regulations and Policy on 5th September 2007.

'This Code of Practice provides Faculties and Student Representatives with guidance about the arrangements for seeking and considering student feedback and a framework for formal meetings between staff and students.'
Code of Practice, Section 1.2

One of the key problems experienced with the current system is the provision of the details of Student Reps each year to the Students' Union. The Code of Practice sets out a timeline for this, stating details should be submitted by the end of week 3. In 2009-10, the Union received a total of 438 sets of rep details, of which only approximately 45% were received by week 3, with the rest coming in throughout the rest of the first term and beyond. Even where faculties supplied details of reps there were sometimes significant gaps in the information provided, the faculty supplying only a name and year with no further contact details or failing to provide details of mode of study.

One of the recommendations made in the last audit of the University was to improve attendance at training sessions for Course Representatives. Unfortunately, attendance is still very low; no more than 50 reps attended training sessions in 2009-10, with a further 20 making contact after the formal training sessions had taken place to receive information and support from the Union. Although the Union tries to advertise these sessions as widely as possible ourselves, we also depend upon efficient communication between the Union, Programme Directors and Representatives to promote the sessions effectively, and this is something that we consistently struggle with. Indeed, the Union often struggles to communicate directly with reps, with few reps feeding back to us on their concerns and activities.

This problem with communication does not automatically mean that the system is not functioning effectively within individual programmes in terms of student representatives being able to feed in the views of students to programme staff. As the following section examining Boards of Studies details, the Union is confident that in the majority of cases the Representation System is present and functioning at a course level, although clearly the low levels of student satisfaction relating to feedback from students indicate there are improvements to be desired across the board. The Union recognises that it has work to do in order to improve the relationships it has with representatives, and welcomes initiatives in partnership with the University to improve various aspects of the current system.

Attempts have been made by the Student Representative Coordinating Group (SRCG) during the 09-10 academic year to put in place measures to improve communication and attendance at rep training during 10-11. With encouragement from the SRCG, all six faculties have invited the Union's representation staff to

meet with staff within the faculty to discuss how things can be improved, and it is hoped that this will lead to significant increases in rep engagement, for example through school or faculty specific training.

As well as course-level Student Representatives, the Union pushed for the introduction of paid Faculty Representatives across the University and in 2009-10 the University agreed to a trial of this system. Although there have been issues with the administration of the scheme and some difficulties in communication between the Faculty Reps and the faculties themselves, the pilot year saw student attendance at Faculty level committees increase and the Union was able to really benefit from working with the paid reps to further research student opinion. The Union submitted a paper to the University's Student Experience Committee in June 2010 evaluating the first year of this scheme and suggesting adjustments for the future, which was accepted by the University. The Union welcomes the University's commitment in ensuring that the views of students are heard at a faculty level as well as at a course level, and anticipates significant improvements to the way Student Representation as a whole is run due to increased engagement of paid Faculty Reps in 10-11.

The Union's Sabbatical Officers also provide student representation at a number of University level committees, which provides the Union with plenty of opportunities to ensure that the views and needs of students are taken into consideration at a University-wide level. The Union is pleased that over the past academic year it has been able to introduce its own papers and agenda items, and take a lead within the University on a number of issues. For example, the Union presented a paper on 'Free Wednesdays' to the University at the beginning of the 09-10 academic year, and has since worked with the University to ensure that where possible students can benefit from free Wednesday afternoons across the University.

Whilst the Union welcomes the University's commitment to students being full members of these committees at both University, faculty and course level, at faculty level concerns have been raised by Faculty Representatives regarding papers for these meetings not being made available in advance of the meetings, thereby limiting the ability of Faculty Representatives contribute as fully to the meetings as they would like. Sabbatical Officers are also sometimes in the same position, when papers for University level meetings are not circulated with sufficient time for Officers to research student opinions or gain a full understanding of issues they may not previously have encountered.

Boards of Studies

Boards of Studies are the formal meetings that student representatives are expected to attend along with members of course staff. For the purposes of this submission, the Union requested and was provided with the minutes of Boards of Studies for a minimum of two courses or groups of courses within each of the six faculties, in order to try and ascertain how effective Boards of Studies are across the University in listening to and acting upon feedback from students. A list of the courses and dates of meetings is provided in Appendix 4.

The Union notes that there are significant differences between different courses and faculties in terms of the numbers of staff and students who attend the meetings. For example, boards of studies for BA Jewellery and Silversmithing and some courses in Birmingham School of Acting had meetings of just 3-6 staff and 1-4 students. In contrast, a meeting in Law had 21 staff and 8 students present, whilst minutes from a Nursing Board of Studies record 18 staff and 2 students being present, with 32 more individuals sending their apologies.

In terms of the agendas of the Boards of Studies meetings, again there were significant differences between different faculties. In Business, the only items on the agenda appeared to be student matters, which were discussed in detail and included lots of instances of positive feedback being provided. This is to be welcomed. By contrast, minutes from Boards of Studies meetings in Law do not appear to feature any agenda items relating to student matters, although they do make mention of other meetings referred to as 'Course Committees' which may be where student reps are encouraged to share their feedback.

In the vast majority of minutes reviewed, the Union was satisfied that students were given adequate time to raise the issues they were concerned with, and these issues appeared to be dealt with appropriately by staff in the meetings. Students were recorded as giving feedback on a wide variety of issues, many of which concerned elements of the student experience not related to learning and teaching, such as the canteens, car-parking, IT and library facilities and timetabling. The Union recognises that these issues are often impossible for Course Staff to deal with directly, although meetings from the Faculty of Health demonstrate some good practice in this regard; it appears that library staff are invited to attend all Boards of Studies meetings, meaning that students can liaise directly with them. The Union would welcome expansion of this into other faculties, as well as consideration of ways that students can offer feedback and open dialogue with other University staff, for example those responsible for facilities, timetabling or catering.

The Union welcomes a new University working group, chaired by the President of the Students' Union, focussing on a review of Boards of Studies, and hopes that through this review good practice can be shared across faculties, and innovative solutions can be found that will improve the way students perceive the opportunities to give feedback and the way their feedback is acted upon. The Union believes that it is important that Boards of Studies aren't the only element of the Representation System to be reviewed, and will be glad to take the lead on a full-scale review of the Representation System carried out in partnership with the University to see how the existing Code of Practice can be developed into something that will really help increase the profile of student representation and build students' confidence that their feedback really does make a difference across the University.

MAJOR RECOMMENDATION:

The current review of Boards of Studies should be expanded into a full-scale review of the existing representation structure, led by the Students' Union, that allows for possible radical changes and recognises the different needs of different courses, such that a renewed scheme can be launched in the 11-12 academic year with considerably higher levels of buy-in from staff and students across all levels. The Union and University should work towards allocating sufficient resources to student representation.

MINOR RECOMMENDATION 9:

The University should look at whether it is possible to better ensure that all papers for committee meetings at both a University and Faculty level are circulated at least a week in advance of the meeting; further to ensure that hard copies of papers for Faculty level committee meetings are made available to Faculty Representatives at least a week in advance of meetings.

Quality Enhancement through Partnership

The Union welcomes an increased emphasis on enhancement of the student experience from the University, and in particular an increased desire to build a diverse learning community focussing on full student engagement with and participation in a wide range of aspects of the university experience. Through a philosophy of partnership between the Union and University and through various different projects we believe there is a clear commitment towards shared ownership of the challenges outlined in this document and a clear desire to work together towards effective solutions.

Sharing Resources

The Union is pleased to be working in partnership with the University's Centre for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching (CELT) on a range of projects, perhaps most notably driven by the recent 50% secondment of the Student Union's Membership Engagement Manager. This partnership approach has led to positive developments in student engagement more widely and in particular student-staff collaboration throughout the University.

We welcome the national recognition our partnership approach has been generating; from the National Union of Students, who are including BCU as a case study within the joint NUS-HEA Student Engagement Project, from local Further Education colleges through an invitation to speak at the National Association for Managers of Students Services in Colleges (NAMMS) conference in 2011, and from an invitation to present at the Academic Registrars' Council (ARC) in October 2010.

Through this partnership we have witnessed the beginning of the establishment of effective partnerships between students and staff as a cornerstone of the student experience here at Birmingham City University. A 'Learning Community' initiative was launched across the University to engage students in a wide variety of joint academic activities with faculties. The Union believes that both students and staff will benefit from this wider academic engagement.

Partnership Agreement

A very recent outcome from the learning community approach is the 'Partnership Agreement', our take on the commonly found 'Student Agreement', which has been put together by a working group made up of both University and Union staff. This document states clearly the expectations and responsibilities of staff and students under a set of key aspects of university life, with the emphasis very much on an equal partnership between staff and students where both have obligations to the other.

Student Academic Partners (SAP) Scheme.

Our flagship partnership project is the jointly run and developed Student Academic Partners Scheme whereby project teams are selected to integrate students into the teaching and pedagogic research communities of faculties through partnerships between individual students and members of academic staff. The scheme provides students and staff with the opportunity to work in collaboration to strengthen learning and teaching at the University, helping to generate a sense of ownership and pride in the institution and its programmes for all those involved.

The Union recognises the positive outcomes of the first iteration of the SAP Scheme carried out in 2009-10. Speaking to student and staff partners, it is clear that there is a strong feeling that these projects have had a positive impact on the cohorts of students involved as well as providing a valuable opportunity for

the student partners themselves. The Union looks forward to future years of this scheme generating further involvement and engagement from more and more students across the University.

Student Employability

This year we have enjoyed setting an agenda of student employability through seeking the employment of students in a variety of roles within the Union and University. Through co-hosting visits from students employed at both North West Missouri State University and the Copenhagen Business School we have been able to learn from various initiatives that exist at these institutions and have begun discussions as to how to expand far greater employment of students across the university campus benefiting all parties alike. Alongside this, we are entering the design phase of a pilot of our very first Employability Award, accrediting extra curricular activities outside of the classroom with a view to generate evidence of experience and skills gained by students.

Part 4 – Moving on

Employability

In the current economic climate, the issue of employability is a big one for students at BCU and elsewhere. The Union recognises that whilst this is not an obvious academic issue, how students view their employability prospects following completion of their course will have an impact on how they view their whole experience here, including how they perceive learning and teaching and other academic aspects of their course. The University itself is clearly aware of how important this issue is to both students and the University as a whole; the recent Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (LATHE) Conference held at BCU in early July 2010 took 'Employability' as one of its two key themes.

BCU students were asked their views on 'Careers' in the 2009 NSS. Impressively, 87% of students overall agreed with the statement 'As a result of my course, I believe that I have improved my career prospects'. Unsurprisingly, there are differences between different course areas, with the NSS scores showing a range between 50% for students studying JACS course codes related to 'Fine Art' and 100% for students studying JACS course codes in 'Planning (Urban, Rural and Regional)'. The Union is satisfied that the majority of scores in the different subject areas are high, and the exceptions, such as 'Fine Art', are subjects which do not necessarily direct students into a set career in the same way as, for example, health or education studies. Nevertheless, it may be that there is more that the University can do to support students on less obviously career-driven courses to help improve their employability (and indeed, the previously-mentioned employability award would form part of this).

This may be particularly important as the NSS statement 'Good advice is available for making career choices' scored lower at just 65% satisfaction overall, with certain subject areas such as 'English Studies' (19%), 'Sociology' (23%), 'Social Work' (32%) and 'Fine Art' (37%) having worrying low student satisfaction for this statement. Considering that this was final year students responding, the Union is concerned that students are not currently aware of how best to access advice on careers, and that the University may need to make more of an effort to support students throughout their studies to maximise the opportunities for students to make informed choices about their destinations after their studies are completed.

International Students

The ISB from Autumn 2009 gives us some interesting perspectives on the expectations of international students with regards to employability following their studies at BCU. According to the ISB, just under 50% of international students expect the University to help them secure a job whilst over 30% expect the University to contact employers on their behalf. The Union is concerned by the possibility that the University is not doing enough to ensure that international students have more realistic expectations of what the University will do to support them in their work.

Indeed, whilst the satisfaction scores in the ISB for elements relating to employability are not particularly low in general terms, they are lower than most other areas relating to learning. The lowest of these relates to work experience, at 68% satisfaction, then careers advice at 71% and employability at 77%. These scores are not cause for major concern, but do seem to indicate that this is an area that international students would like to see improved, particularly as the ISB shows they are deemed as very important to international students.

Part 5 - Franchise Colleges

In compiling this chapter the Union has used data from the National Student Survey 2009, as well as information from focus groups held in March 2010 with a total of 68 franchise students. At South Birmingham College (SBC) we held two focus groups, one comprised solely of HNC Construction students (9 attendees) and the other of students from several courses (16 attendees). Two further focus groups were held at Birmingham Metropolitan College (BMC) comprising one with HND Legal Studies students attending (25 attendees) and another with HND Business Management students (18 attendees). It should be noted that Birmingham City University has franchise arrangements with several other providers, and that the views of franchise students at providers other than SBC and BMC are not represented in this chapter.

The NSS 2009 results showed on the whole that franchise college students appeared to be more satisfied with their experience than those studying at the University. The focus groups demonstrated a wide range of views both positive and negative, although as one would expect the students were in general more inclined to raise negative issues and that is reflected in this chapter.

Arrival and Induction

Most students in the focus groups were satisfied that they received accurate information about their course. Opinion varied amongst the focus group attendees as to how useful they felt their induction had been, with positive comments from some and uncertainty from some students as to whether they had in fact even received one. One focus group, HND Business and Management (BMC), appeared particularly dissatisfied with the induction from BCU as opposed to the induction at BMC, and this was echoed to a lesser extent in the other groups. Comments included feeling that the BCU induction happened too late and was inadequate, focusing largely on library facilities. Students stated they expected and would have liked to receive more information on access times, Moodle, student cards and other facilities.

Students also had expectations that they would receive BCU ID and passwords but this wasn't uniformly the case; in one example a student had to wait until the second semester for their password. The University asserts that its system should mean that fully enrolled students are issued with a University ID card, network ID and password before they start their course. It is unclear why some of the students from the focus groups had experienced delays; however, regardless of the reason, they did not appear to have been informed of the action they needed to take in order to resolve the situation.

Students at the colleges did display a desire to be part of the larger BCU environment, including being invited to BCU Freshers events.

"BCU induction was just college lecturer showing us around"
(Student; HNC Construction, TEE; SBC Focus Group)

"The feedback from our group washappy with induction at college but feel totally isolated from BCU.....this was raised at Board of Studies meeting" (Student; SBC Focus Group)

In addition to a feeling of segregation from BCU was a suspicion that it wasn't only students who received inadequate information and were not kept informed. Several noted that course staff did not appear to be provided with information in

a timely manner. The prevailing view was that collaboration between BCU and the colleges was poor.

"The problem is with the delivery of information between BCU and the college." (Student; HNC Construction, TEE; SBC Focus Group)

Learning and Teaching

Results from the section titled 'The teaching on my course' in the NSS showed that in general students at franchise colleges were more satisfied than students studying at BCU. Overall in this section, BCU students had a satisfaction level of 80% whilst at Franchise Colleges the results were higher, specifically 88% (49 respondents with a 42% response rate) for South Birmingham College and 85% (49 respondents with 51% response rate) for Birmingham Metropolitan College. It is also worth noting that many of the scores in this section relating to franchise colleges increased significantly from 2008.

Whilst the Union did not replicate exactly the questions from this section of the NSS in the focus groups students were asked if staff made the subject interesting and whether staff were good at explaining their subject. The majority of the students at the focus groups were positive that staff were good at explaining things and made their subject interesting although there were occasional negative comments concerning particular lecturers' styles and the resources used to teach the subject.

Whilst HND Legal Studies (BMC) were particularly satisfied with most aspects of learning and teaching, overall students at the SBC focus groups, which covered a greater number of courses, expressed more general satisfaction. Students on Business and Management (BMC) made comments about lectures not being a useful format for learning and the wish for lecturers to more actively engage with students. Students across different groups expressed the desire that additional elements such as quizzes and presentations and online weekly self assessment tests be used.

More negative comments were made around lecturers who did not seem to have control of the class and concentrated on only a small group of students. Students at SBC were unhappy that the lecturers did not apply a firmer policy to latecomers in order to avoid disruption to lectures.

The majority of students appeared happy that the amount of contact time (face to face or online) between staff and students supported effective learning and no further comments were made about this.

Organisation and Management

When asked about issues around timetabling and organisation and management of their course there were again mixed responses from the focus groups. Students in the BMC focus groups, with one exception, did not feel that changes in the course were communicated effectively whilst in the SBC focus groups the reverse was true. Findings from the NSS, whilst not as stark, point to a similar opinion. Just 57% of students at BMC were satisfied with the statement 'Any changes in the course or teaching have been communicated effectively' (49 respondents with a 51% response rate) compared with 71% at SBC. (49 respondents with a 42% response rate)

HND Legal Studies students (BMC) described what they saw as an example of modules being added shortly before exams and it was felt that the problem was being caused by BCU not updating college tutors sufficiently. Students in SBC also made reference to the apparent lack of communication between BCU and the

college, with BCU appearing to make changes to the course or syllabus without warning. The Union has not been able to establish where the responsibility for any lack of communication lies and understands from the University that it could be in communication between members of the course team at the colleges. We would however, urge the University to satisfy itself that the systems in place for communicating with partner colleges contain a mechanism for ensuring that information is cascaded down to course staff in a timely fashion.

"Collaboration between BCU and college is really poor. We've encountered so many problems since the start of the year.... ID, not knowing which modules we're doing. Our teachers not being able to log on to Moodle" (Student; HND Legal Studies, ELSS; BMC Focus Group)

"....and then the next week you go in and they (lecturers) are like ahh but they changed that on the syllabus and I only found out two hours ago" (Student; HND Legal Studies, ELSS; BMC Focus Group)

When asked about timetables the expected variety of opinion was expressed which largely depended on how individual students would prefer to schedule their time. Students at SBC appreciated a degree of flexibility in their timetables.

Knowing how to succeed

With regards to Assessment and Feedback in the NSS once again franchise students were generally speaking more satisfied than students taught at BCU, with the overall franchise scores ranging from between 6% to 19% higher on the questions in this section. The biggest difference was with regards to 'Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand', with 76% of franchise students satisfied compared with just 57% of BCU students.

The focus groups did not show such clear distinctions as the results of the NSS survey. Certainly HND Legal Studies students (BMC) felt that they understood the assessment criteria and that it was both clear and fair. They were also happy with both oral and written feedback on their work and expressed agreement that the feedback helped them to know what to do better in future. The results were more varied with students on HND Business Management (BMC).

Students at SBC confirmed that they felt they understood the assessment criteria; however it was apparent from discussions in one of the groups at SBC that group work could sometimes be an issue. Some students were under the impression that their mark would suffer if one student did not pull their weight, especially if they had not had a say in deciding who to work with, although students on other courses were happy that they were marked individually and the lecturers were prepared to intervene if there were problems within groups.

There were some negative comments about feedback in most groups ranging from it being illegible to being provided too late to be of any use. Students were also frustrated by tutors not being able to answer questions and then being sent "around the houses" in a quest to find a tutor who could satisfactorily answer their query. Some students expressed a desire for more face to face feedback rather than just written comments. In some cases the students also felt that they would like feedback on their exams and that they did not know what to do to get a high mark, believing that whilst the marking criteria was available it did not provide specific examples of what was needed to obtain a higher grade.

Positively, students in HNC Construction (SBC) focus group commented that lecturers were happy to help and were very supportive.

"If you don't understand where you went wrong...the tutors will explain it more to you." (Student; HNC Construction, TEE; SBC Focus Group)

"Tutors give e-mails and contact numbers.... Can contact them at weekends" (Student; SBC Focus Group)

"When we start new assignments the tutors go through assignments and break down marks." (Student; SBC Focus Group)

Facilities

With regards to learning resources in the NSS 2009, students at South Birmingham College had similar satisfaction levels to BCU students, most of which had increased significantly since 2008. However, students at BMC were much less satisfied across all areas with satisfaction levels of 78%, 61% and 56% (49 respondents with 51% response rate) for library resources, general IT resources and specialised equipment, facilities or rooms respectively, compared with 83%, 82% and 77% for SBC (49 respondents with a 52% response rate).

"In the particular course I am doing.... a lot of the equipment is unavailable because of 6th form classes using it, the editing suite has a class room in it, so when there is a class, even if they are not using the editing suites the editing suite is inaccessible. Because of a lot of building work at Sutton Coldfield College we now have only one classroom with computers available to use to use during lessons. It also happens that this room is the room with Macs in and has the specialist software Quark and Photoshop which is not available elsewhere, meaning there are several classes wanting to use the room at the same time." (Student; HND Media and Communication, BMC; NSS)

The focus group discussions at both colleges had issues with learning resources. Students indicated that they felt the libraries on their own campuses were small whilst BCU was more adequately resourced. They felt disadvantaged by poor library provision and the availability of computers. It was also commented upon that as well as course books it would be beneficial to have resources available that explained how to study. Students at SBC expressed satisfaction with Moodle whilst some students at BMC did not feel it worked well and noted that not all their lecturers were on it. Students felt one solution to the problem of computer shortage would be for students to have a shared login and password for their college and BCU so they could use their laptops at either site.

"If you going to get your Moodle username sorted ... you have to go around and speak to many people. I've still not actually got on it and I've just been told to go and speak to a person who's told me to speak to another person..." (Student; HND Business Management, BCBS; BMC Focus Group)

Significantly one issue which was raised in all focus groups was that students did not have access to study rooms in the library or areas where they could do group work. If they attempted to do group work in the library they would be told off for talking. Several comments were made about the fact that whilst students would be challenged if they were talking library staff were often chatting and noisy without regard for students studying.

BMC students commented on the loss of a Mature Students' Room in a recent refurbishment which students felt would have been a suitable space they could do group work in. The University has recently confirmed that a room has been booked for BMC Business and Management evening students to use to help alleviate this problem. Whilst this may assist these particular students this was an issue in all focus groups at both colleges. We would welcome the University and colleges exploring the possibility of further provision.

"BCU has cubicles... shut yourself off and you can do group work...whereas the library at SBC is small." (Student; SBC Focus Group)

"BCU library is awesome... I'm looking forward to using it next year." (Student; SBC Focus Group)

There was a clear strand of opinion, coming from both the NSS and the focus groups, that students expected to be treated more like adult learners even though they were based at a college.

"I didn't enjoy studying at the Sutton Coldfield campus as I don't think they are well equipped enough or accommodating to us as mature students." (Student; HND Legal Studies, ELSS; BMC; NSS)

"The facilities at Sutton College are appalling and need to be looked at; there is not a dedicated room of computers for group presentations! Also we are treated like kids rather than adults." (Student; HND Legal Studies, ELSS; BMC; NSS)

Support

With regards to academic support, overall franchise students in the NSS were 5% more satisfied than BCU students at 77%. Here, SBC students were slightly happier than those at BMC. Even within SBC, however, support appeared to vary depending on the course. A student in focus group 4, which contained students from a variety of courses, spoke of additional study skills sessions being offered. A student from the other SBC focus group commented that the students would appreciate additional academic support being offered outside the course. They appeared to believe that additional support was not available, although the Union is aware that franchise students should have access to all support services offered by the University and Union.

Student Representation

In all four focus groups there was a general agreement that students were aware of the student representation system even if they were not aware of their own rep. All students except those on HND Business and Management (BMC) felt there was a good level of dialogue between students and staff, even if this did not necessarily lead to problems getting solved.

Whilst students on HND Legal Studies (BMC) expressed the opinion that they were happy with the student reps and the system they also commented that even if issues were raised with staff directly or through students reps the staff appeared not to have the authority to deal with concerns. Additionally BMC students observed that they did not feel able to communicate with "management" at the college. They felt that the default response they received when raising a concern was that it was the responsibility of BCU not the college. On a positive note students on HNC Construction (SBC) stated they were confident raising issues with staff without the need for an "official" rep.

With regards to feedback from students in the NSS 71% of franchise students were satisfied that their feedback was listened to and valued and 62% (21 respondents with 10% response rate) agreed that it was clear how students' comments had been acted on. This compares to 47% and 42% of students at BCU. However, looking specifically at BMC, these were lower, at just 62% (16 respondents) for the feedback being listened to and valued and just 44% (16 respondents with a 16% response rate) for it being clear how students' comments had been acted on. The focus groups at BMC seemed to support the feeling that students felt they raised issues repeatedly without any resolution and in particular that students never knew if their views were acted on.

"You keep complaining but you never get any feedback about anything." (Student; HND Business and Management, BCBS; BMC Focus Group)

MINOR RECOMMENDATION 10:

The University should consider whether it can improve communication between the Faculties and staff and students at Franchise Colleges, to address issues of organisation and management including how changes to course content are communicated.

MINOR RECOMMENDATION 11:

The University should look into whether it is possible to provide dedicated learning spaces for BCU students at Franchise Colleges to better facilitate group work where it is included as part of the course, either within existing library facilities or through mature student rooms or the equivalent.

Conclusion

Throughout this submission it is clear that there is significant variance between the experiences of different students, which is only to be expected at an institution the size and shape of Birmingham City University. However, it is also clear that there are areas of the student experience across the University that are generally excellent and areas where problems exist.

The Union is pleased to note the generally very high levels of satisfaction with learning and teaching across the University. It is our belief that this is one of the most vital aspects of the student experience and we believe our students can generally expect a very good relationship with staff and a very positive experience of learning and teaching. We would also like to commend the recent initiatives and partnership work detailed in the chapter on 'Quality Enhancement through Partnership', as well as the clear and excellent information currently provided on the website and prospectuses.

In other areas such as 'Facilities' and 'Support', whilst it is clear that there are some concerns regarding satisfaction levels of certain groups of students or very specific areas within these broader topics, the Union is again pleased to be able to comment positively on the generally high levels of student satisfaction.

The areas we have identified as being of more concern - in general, assessment and feedback, organisation and management and student representation and voice - should come as little surprise to the institution, and the Union recognises the efforts of the University, both overall and from particular staff, faculties and departments, to improve student satisfaction in all of these areas. The Union is confident that the recommendations outlined below to try to address some of these areas will not, in general, prove controversial.

Overall, we feel the University has much to be proud of, as well as much potential for improvement. The Union is confident that where satisfaction levels are currently not as high as they could be, current and future efforts and initiatives have the potential to fundamentally address these concerns, and that the student experience at Birmingham City is likely to continue to develop and improve over the coming years in a variety of ways.

Recommendations

The following is the complete list of key recommendations that the Union wishes to make to the University as a result of our findings in this submission. They are separated into Major Recommendations (generally wider issues or areas that the Union believes should be addressed as a priority during 2010-11 and beyond) and Minor Recommendations (issues that the Union believes are less of a priority and that have a lesser impact on the student experience overall). Almost all of these have been included above in the relevant chapter of this document, with the exception of the first Major Recommendation relating to the need for further research into the experiences of students with disabilities.

As these are often based largely on the feedback we have received from our students, the Union recognises that in some cases these may be things the University is already doing, or indeed has already tried to do previously. We aim to work with the University over the coming academic year and beyond to address each of these initial recommendations, to learn more about what is already in place and how we may be able to support it, to develop these recommendations as required based on feedback from both the University and students and to push for further improvements wherever we can.

MAJOR RECOMMENDATION 1:

The Union, with the support of the University, should carry out further research into the experiences of disabled students at BCU; this should be disseminated and action points resulting from this research agreed on at the Student Experience Committee.

MAJOR RECOMMENDATION 2:

We recognise and welcome that the University is already aware of the issues surrounding student satisfaction with Organisation and Management, and will no doubt already have ideas on how to tackle this. The Union recommends that this be made a clear priority in 2010-11; that efforts are made to learn from the good practice in some courses and faculties and for this to be shared widely with areas that are doing less well; that students are consulted further about how they wish to receive communications from the University regarding the organisation of their course (which the Union would be pleased to work with the University on) and that staff at all levels of the institution are encouraged to get involved in tackling this problem.

MAJOR RECOMMENDATION 3:

The Union is confident that the University is already aware of the issues surrounding student satisfaction with feedback and assessment. However, we recommend that stronger measures need to be taken to ensure that staff are aware of what is reasonable for students to expect from them, in terms of both timing and quality of feedback on assessment. The Union will undertake to carry out further research into students' understanding and expectations of feedback. The Union urges the 20 day turnaround time to be mandated more strongly throughout the University; further, the University should make reference to NUS guides on best practice on feedback, and seek to disseminate and share more widely existing examples of good practice around assessment and feedback and encourage the greater application of existing innovations.

MAJOR RECOMMENDATION 4:

The current review of Boards of Studies should be expanded into a full-scale review of the existing representation structure, led by the Students' Union, that allows for possible radical changes and recognises the different needs of different courses, such that a renewed scheme can be launched in the 11-12 academic

year with considerably higher levels of buy-in from staff and students across all levels. The Union and University should work towards allocating sufficient resources to student representation.

MINOR RECOMMENDATION 1:

To ensure that all faculties are sending out similar relevant information to all new students regarding the University as a whole, and to seek to share good practice between faculties regarding the information sent out about courses in advance, including all information sent to international students, and specifically for the Business School to seek to learn what it can do to improve student satisfaction in this area.

MINOR RECOMMENDATION 2:

To consider including more information dedicated specifically to part time study and to clarify what is meant by Equivalent Level Qualifications in future versions of the prospectuses/ University guide.

MINOR RECOMMENDATION 3:

To examine the procedure for inducting International Students who do not arrive in time for the main induction, and what changes may be possible to improve the experience both for those students who arrive late and the rest of their cohorts; to examine whether there needs to be a stricter cut-off point for when students can join a course that has already commenced.

MINOR RECOMMENDATION 4:

To consider expanding current provision of electronic submission of coursework, with a particular view on how this could be beneficial to part time students across the University.

MINOR RECOMMENDATION 5:

The Union and University should work together to raise awareness among all students at Birmingham City University of the fact that they are able to request feedback on exams.

MINOR RECOMMENDATION 6:

The Faculty of PME, if it hasn't already, should investigate the issues highlighted by students around the issue of practice space, and innovative solutions should be sought incorporating the input of students and potentially looking for facilities outside of the immediate Conservatoire campus if it is felt these would be beneficial to students.

MINOR RECOMMENDATION 7:

To look at what can be done to better manage the way the University's libraries are used by students, to focus on ensuring that those who need a place for quiet study are able to access this when they need to. The Union will endeavour to work with library staff to find ways we can support the libraries to address this issue.

MINOR RECOMMENDATION 8:

For the University to consider, when reviewing the EC claims system, whether additional provision needs to be made for those students who, with justifiable reason, attempt assessments and then afterwards wish to submit a claim for EC. The aim of any additional provision should be to ensure that vulnerable students are not disadvantaged by too great an emphasis being placed on whether or not they took the assessment rather than the actual circumstances behind their claim.

MINOR RECOMMENDATION 9:

The University should look at whether it is possible to better ensure that all papers for committee meetings at both a University and Faculty level are circulated at least a week in advance of the meeting; further to ensure that hard copies of papers for Faculty level committee meetings are made available to Faculty Representatives at least a week in advance of meetings.

MINOR RECOMMENDATION 10:

The University should consider whether it can improve communication between the Faculties and staff and students at Franchise Colleges, to address issues of organisation and management including how changes to course content are communicated.

MINOR RECOMMENDATION 11:

The University should look into whether it is possible to provide dedicated learning spaces for BCU students at Franchise Colleges to better facilitate group work where it is included as part of the course, either within existing library facilities or through mature student rooms or the equivalent.

Appendix 1 - Part Time Student Survey

These questions were sent out in an email by the Students' Union to all Part Time Students. Students were informed that the first 20 students to email back their responses would be given 150 printer credits (worth £7.50). In total 27 students responded.

1. When making your decision about whether to study at Birmingham City University do you feel that you had all the information you needed? Was the information useful?
 2. Thinking about the information you received, has the University met your expectations?
 3. How do you feel about the organisation of your course and your course schedule? For example, hand-in of work arrangements, availability of academic and course staff?
 4. Have you been able to access support when needed?
 5. What do you think of the facilities to aid study? How sufficient are they for your needs? (Study rooms, library, printing, online material etc.)
 6. How immersed in student social life are you able to be? Does this matter to you?
 7. Do you feel your voice is listened to by the institution?
 8. How do you feel being a part-time student affects your experience of studying at Birmingham City University?
- Optional Question: What have been the best and worst aspects of your experience as a part-time student at this institution? Do you have anything else you would like to share with us?

Appendix 2 – Disabled Student Survey

These questions were sent out on behalf of the Union by Student Services to disabled students at the University. Students were informed that if they responded they would receive £10 Amazon vouchers. In total 3 students responded.

1. If applicable, what type of advice and information did you receive from Pre-Entry Disability Adviser in terms of explaining what support is available, how to apply for DSAs, and trying to get as much support in place as possible for the start of term?
2. Once you disclosed your disability how quickly was the support you needed made available to you?
3. (We are not talking about staff with specific responsibility for disability support here). How supportive and knowledgeable did you find staff on your course were regarding any specific requirements you had?
4. Do you feel that the assessment methods used were flexible enough to allow you to demonstrate you had achieved the particular level/outcome? Where relevant do you feel that your disability was taken account of and adjustments made
5. Are lectures and seminars in a relevant and useful format? Why/how can they be made better? Are tutors providing handouts at least a week in advance if this has been recommended for a student?
6. Are the facilities available to aid study sufficient for your needs? (Study rooms, printing, online material, library etc.)
7. What were your experiences of the Student Union - Was it accessible? Any areas where we could improve in terms of access. Have you participated in any social activities organised by the Union? E.g. sports and societies or nights out. Have you wanted to and not been able to? If not, why not?
8. Do you feel your voice is listened to by the institution? Have you had any experiences, good or bad, with regards to course reps representing your views or needs to staff?
9. Throughout your time at University, when you have needed support and/or guidance in relation to your disability how easy did you find it was to access information about it?

Appendix 3 – Short Research Survey

Thank you for agreeing to answer some questions about your experiences at Birmingham City University. The information you provide will be incorporated into research the Students' Union is carrying out for our Student Written Submission to the University's auditors. As a thank you for participating, you will be entered into a prize draw to win £75 in cash. Please provide an email address or other contact details so we can contact you if you have won.

Email:

Course/ Faculty:

Please tick if you are:

Postgraduate International Part Time Mature

1. What has surprised you most about the experience of being a student at Birmingham City University and why?

2. If you could change one thing about the academic experience at Birmingham City University, what would it be? (For example, anything in relation to lectures, the library, feedback on assessment etc – not issues relating to car parking or the canteens.)

3. If you wanted to suggest to the University that they made that change, how would you go about it and how successful do you think you would be?

4. Since you started your course, have you been aware of any changes being made in relation to issues that students have complained about?

5. The University is being audited in the autumn. Is there anything you think the Students' Union should make the auditors aware of about the student experience at Birmingham City University?

Appendix 4 – List of Meetings of Board of Studies Reviewed

Birmingham Institute of Art and Design

BA Jewellery and Silversmithing

2nd December 2009

Art Based MA Courses

9th December 2009

Birmingham City Business School

Certificate in Audit Management and Consultancy (Block Release)

8th December 2009

4th March 2010

Certificate in Audit Management and Consultancy (Distance Learning)

14th December 2009

Certificate in Audit Management and Consultancy (Full Time)

20th January 2010

Diploma in Audit Management and Consultancy (Block Release)

19th November 2009

18th March 2010

Education, Law and Social Sciences

PGCE Secondary

2nd June 2009

10th November 2009

23rd February 2010

LLB Law

11th November 2009

24th February 2010

Health

BSc Radiography (Diagnostic and Radiotherapy)

23rd September 2009

BSc Speech and Language Therapy

25th September 2009

24th February 2010-09-02

Midwifery

3rd March 2009

29th September 2009

2nd March 2010

DipHE Nursing

28th September 2009

13th January 2010

12th May 2010

Performance, Media and English

BA Acting

18th November 2009

BA Community and Applied Theatre/ Dance Theatre
18th November 2009

BA Stage Management
18th November 2009

MA Professional Voice Practice
18th November 2009

PGDip/MA Acting
18th November 2009

Technology, Engineering and the Environment

Computing, Telecommunications and Networks based MSc courses
10th March 2009
10th November 2009
9th March 2010

BEng Engineering Design and Manufacturing Systems
6th November 2009
18th February 2010

BSc Engineering Design and Manufacturing Systems
6th November 2009
18th February 2010