

# **BIRMINGHAM CITY UNIVERSITY**

## **ACCESS AGREEMENT 2015-16**

### 1. **Fee Levels**

Higher fees were introduced across the sector in 2012. At that time, it was anticipated that there might be some price sensitivity of demand, particularly within some of the student populations from which the University traditionally recruits, and so the University set a range of fees within several bands, with only the highest-cost provision set at a £9,000 fee.

The evidence now suggests that young full-time applicants, even those from disadvantaged or low-income groups, have not been deterred by the higher fees and that applicants will not allow fee levels to compromise their choice of course (Higher Education Policy Institute October 2013) . Indeed, it has been found that the introduction of variable tuition fees in 2012 was not associated with any substantial changes in applicant course choices or any change in the share of applications for live-at-home study (UCAS July 2012).

The University's own report on entrant participation for 2013-14 indicates that the University's course fees have had no adverse effect on the proportion of student entrants from low participation neighbourhoods (LPN), low socio-economic (LSEC) backgrounds and Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) backgrounds, all of which report a slight increase on two years previously and have stayed the same or shown a further small increase on the previous year as indicated below:

	LPN entrants	LSEC entrants	BME entrants
2013-14	13%	48%	48%
2012-13	13%	48%	45%
2011-12	12%	43%	42%

Following a range of policy changes and the potential of future cuts (including those to Student Opportunity Funding, Access to Learning Fund, Disabled Students' Allowances and the National Scholarship Programme) there will be much less funding available to support outreach activity, widening participation, support for student retention and progression, support for student hardship, all of which are critical elements to the nature of our student profile and indeed mission as an inclusive University.

The decision has, therefore, been taken to charge a standard fee of £9,000 for all full-time first-degree programmes for 2015-16 entry, in order to enable the University to protect the student experience. It should be noted that, depending upon the level of the funding cut in 2015-16, much of the additional income to the University that year from fees will merely replace the income lost from other forms of funding.

All HND, HNC and Foundation degrees will remain at the previous fee of up to £6,000.

Where a full-time undergraduate student opts to extend the normal length of a Bachelor's degree by an additional year in order to take a full-year work placement there will be no fee for the additional placement year.

The fees for part time courses have been set pro rata to full time courses. Under these arrangements no part time student will be charged more than £6,750.

The fee set for entrants will apply to them for the duration of their studies. Fees will be subject to an annual inflationary increase, where allowed by the Government.

## 2. Performance and Expenditure

Birmingham City University performs exceptionally well both in absolute terms and by comparison to the adjusted sector benchmark in indicators of widening participation. Examination of the HESA performance indicators for 2012-13 reveals:

- for young full-time undergraduate entrants
  - 97.1% from state schools or colleges (above the benchmark of 95.3%)
  - 45.7% from NS-SEC classes 4, 5, 6 & 7 (significantly above the benchmark of 39.5%)
  - 13.3% from low participation neighbourhoods (just below the benchmark of 13.6%)
- for mature full-time undergraduate entrants
  - 12.7% with no previous HE qualification and from low participation neighbourhoods (above the benchmark of 11.4%)
- for part time undergraduate entrants
  - 1.2% of entrants with no previous HE qualification and from low participation neighbourhoods (below the benchmark of 1.8%)

Indicators of student success reveal the following:

- non-continuation following year of entry
  - a further trend of a reduction in non-continuation, which at 7.0% is better than the sector-adjusted benchmark of 8.3%
  - within the above, the University performs slightly below benchmark in the proportion of young full-time first degree entrants from low participation neighbourhoods who do not continue in HE: at 10.0%, compared to 9.1% for the sector adjusted benchmark
  - non-continuation of mature full-time entrants remains better than benchmark for those pursuing first degrees (at 9.0% for those without a previous HE qualification it is better than the benchmark of 10.6% and UK average of 11.1%, and at 7.7% for those with a prior HE qualification it is better than the 9.1% benchmark and the UK average of 9.5%)
- projected learning outcome
  - the proportion of full-time first degree entrants projected for neither award nor transfer has improved further to 12.1% and is now 1.4% better than the adjusted sector benchmark.

The Equality and Diversity Committee (a sub-committee of Senate) maintains an overview of the University's performance with regards to improving student opportunity. It receives various sets of student statistical analyses to explore possible significant relationships which may exist between student performance and the various 'protected characteristics' identified under the Equality Act 2010 for which data is held (age, gender, disability and race). During 2012/13, the analyses covered the following areas:

- participation – examination of levels of diversity within enrolment to University programmes;
- retention – examination of retention rates of new entrants continuing their studies at the University;
- progression – measuring the completion of all study within the expected time-span for their programme;
- achievement – examination of the variation of First Degree classifications;
- employability – examination of responses to the six month Destination of Leavers from HE survey.

Additional factors including entry qualification and subject area were included in the analysis as these have been shown at sector level to be significant factors in understanding student performance. Where significant relationships were discovered, these were highlighted and recommendations made for further investigation. The key findings for monitoring of students with protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010 and for whom data was available, showed a correlation, consistent in at least the last three reporting cycles, between:

- ethnicity and achievement (degree classification);
- ethnicity and employability or destination; and
- age and retention and efficient completion (that is, completion within the expected timescale).

Senate uses the reports and analyses from the Committee to develop targeted support interventions to assist students.

The Committee has or plans to implement the following actions during this Access Agreement period:

- to extend the equality data fields (e.g. sexual orientation, religion and belief) for student enrolment 2013-14 in line with HESA recommendations;
- to provide appropriate targeted support for students, especially mature and BME students in their first year of study as first year performance has been identified as a statistically significant predictor of progression and achievement;
- to continue to gather good practice examples regarding the retention and completion rates of mature students as institutionally, students aged over 20 years old are significantly less likely to complete their courses efficiently when compared to young students; and
- to develop Faculty-led projects via the University's Student Mentoring Scheme to target improving performance amongst identified student groups

(e.g. mentoring for BME students) together with taking part in the National Mentoring Consortium which will also help to inform such activity.

The findings of the Equality and Diversity Committee have been taken into account when compiling this Access Agreement. In addition, an equality impact analysis of this Access Agreement has been conducted which has established that no evidence has been found to suggest there would be any adverse effects on any group or groups of people on the basis of their shared and protected characteristics as defined by the Equality Act 2010.

Our evaluation of performance in relation to access and student success is that we have a demonstrable record of achievement in relation to widening access and have consolidated our recent solid progress in relation to first-year retention. The University has now also improved its performance in relation to progression and completion after the first year. The focus of our access agreement expenditure will remain upon the provision of tailored investment to support retention and success in achieving an award along with some increased expenditure on outreach activities.

We therefore intend to commit approximately 15% of additional fee income (10% for postgraduate ITT students), for countable expenditure on additional access and student success measures. This will include continuation of the regional collaborative activity that has replaced the Aim Higher Scheme, University outreach activity and new activities to increase and support student retention, progression and achievement. We intend to continue expenditure on meeting sector adjusted benchmark for the participation of students in receipt of disabled students' allowance and we will meet all bursary commitments for continuing students.

## 2.1 Access

### 2.1.1. Financial Support

With the absorption of the Access to Learning Fund (ALF) into the Student Opportunity Fund, the University will continue to support students suffering hardship to at least the level currently funded by ALF. However, dependent upon the specific nature of the cases and applications received for hardship funding, the University may choose to augment this sum and provide additional funding. Indeed, in previous years the University received, and had cause to commit to students suffering hardship, significantly higher sums from ALF than was received in the most recent ALF allocation, demonstrating evidence of need beyond that currently being funded.

### 2.1.2. Outreach

Birmingham City University has always been committed to delivering and participating in outreach activities. The most recent institutional performance indicators have shown that the University continues to perform above benchmark in recruiting young First Degree students from state run schools, low income households and neighbourhoods with historically low participation.

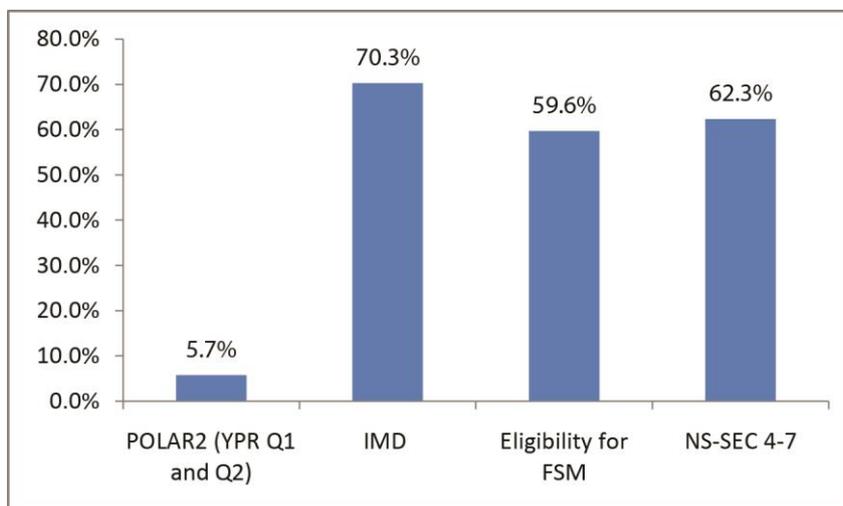
Many of the advice and guidance activities undertaken by the University's outreach team, including our generic ones, automatically capture disadvantaged learners. Our main catchment areas include a high proportion of learners from a widening participation background. Research from the Birmingham and Solihull Aimhigher partnership shows that 66% of the schools and colleges in the Birmingham and Solihull area fall into the higher category of institutions within a particular widening

participation classification in comparison with 29% nationally. This ranking considers the proportion of targeted learners in those institutions who fall within a widening participation classification using a range of Indicators, such as eligibility for free schools meals, Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD), National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (N-SEC 4-8), and no parental engagement in HE. However, the majority of the University's top ten feeder institutions are classed under this ranking by Aimhigher as 'High Priority', and there has been a further overall increase in applications to Birmingham City University from the 'High Priority' feeder institutions compared to 2012.

In June 2013, as part of the Aimhigher partnership, Birmingham City University ran two summer schools for 64 young people in Years 10 and 12. The Year 10 activity gave access to our Birmingham School of Acting and the Year 12 event supported the young people with transition from school/college to Higher Education. 63 participants completed evaluations with 98.4% being satisfied or very satisfied with the event they attended. Furthermore, there was a 30% increase in the proportion of learners who understood post-event what university life would be like, a 22% increase in the understanding of how to apply to university and a 22% increase in the proportion of learners who felt that University was now for people like them.

Overall a report on the outreach activity delivery for 2012/13 showed that the team engaged with 97 schools, delivering 252 activities to over 30,000 participants. 53% of schools fall into the high priority classification, and 15% into the medium priority group based on a range of measures, such as IMD, free school meals etc as identified above.

Data gathered and research done by Aimhigher as shown in the table below demonstrates that the outreach team activities benefitted a high percentage of learners that fall into the widening participation cohort based on a range of measures as indicated previously



As we have demonstrated, Birmingham City University's outreach team works closely with key feeder schools and colleges in communities with low participation rates to raise aspirations and encourage applications to higher education. We intend to continue to offer a comprehensive range of activities, which include subject enrichment workshops, subject-based master classes, campus visits, one-to-one surgeries giving advice on UCAS applications, attendance at parents' evenings and careers fairs, talks on student finance and what to expect at university, and conferences for college students and their advisors.

We will undertake activities to maintain our performance at or above the sector adjusted benchmark in relation to entrants from state education, social class and low participation neighbourhoods.

Going forward the University is forging stronger relationships with key feeders and as part of these partnerships will be offering targeted advice and guidance to potential students from a widening participation background. These groups of learners will be supported in a sustained way through the research and application process and transition to University. Learners will be selected on the basis of need and will include mature learners and looked after children.

Monitoring and evaluation of outreach activities will be undertaken through a range of methods, including:

- Tracking learners who take part in intensive activities such as mentoring and master classes to monitor applications and progression to the University.
- Carrying out a sample of pre and post- event evaluations to monitor attitudinal shift and effectiveness.

It should be noted that the tracking of student data can be problematic as it requires parental consent so data capture is not always comprehensive. Since outreach activities are targeted at various age groups, there is often a delay before application or conversion analysis can be completed.

The indicator relating to the recruitment of students in receipt of Disabled Students' Allowance has in the past shown the University performing below benchmark. While the percentage of students in receipt of Disabled Students' Allowance rose consistently year on year in the student populations analysed, this trend was matched by a corresponding increase in the benchmark. The University proposed to improve the participation of students with disabilities to match or exceed benchmark. The most recent figures suggest that the University has remained below benchmark for a second year having exceeded it for full time and part time undergraduates for the previous two years. We will continue to devote resource to enable us to improve this position.

### 2.1.3. Collaborative working between institutions

Birmingham City University will continue the collaborative Aimhigher West Midlands partnership established in 2011-12 with the University of Birmingham, Aston University and University College Birmingham. The partnership exceeded its milestones in 2012-13 and is on target to do so again in 2013-14. We, therefore, confirm our intention to increase the number of young people from disadvantaged backgrounds engaged in Aimhigher's intensive mentoring and residential activity to 1,000 each year from 2014-15 to 2018-19, retaining a focus on pre-16 students.

In response to demand we will also continue to deliver less intensive activities for young people and parents and events for higher education advice and guidance practitioners working to support the progression of disadvantaged young people.

Birmingham City University will jointly fund Aimhigher with a contribution of £35,000 in 2014-15 and will continue to be intimately involved in its governance and management. Opportunities to extend the partnership's delivery via engagement with other HEIs, alignment with the National Strategy for Student Access and

Success and other relevant policy developments / funding streams will be explored. The outreach activities delivered through the partnership will complement Birmingham City University's own extensive programme of widening access and fair access measures outlined elsewhere in this agreement.

The partnership has a comprehensive evaluation strategy to monitor targeting, engagement, the progression of beneficiaries and the impact of Aimhigher on aspiration, attainment and progression to HE. This work has progressed to schedule via a PhD linked research project with the Centre for Higher Education Equity and Access. Large control and experimental groups span the 11-19 phase and include young people who meet all, some or no WP targeting criterion.

Analysis to date suggests that engagement in Aimhigher during Key Stage 3 and 4 generates increased aspiration towards higher education (+12.5% above non-participants) and is associated with improved KS4 attainment (62.1% of learners engaged 6 times achieved 5 GCSEs at A\*-C, including English and Maths, compared to a cohort average of 56%). Initial findings suggest the full-time HE application rate for the cohort of Aimhigher beneficiaries attaining the age of 18 or 19 during 2011/12 is higher (43.7%) than that for the local population of 18 and 19 year olds (30.6%). The partnership's ability to evaluate causality and impact in such detail is dependent on access to learner level data from schools, local authorities and UCAS. At the time of writing UCAS future policy on access to learner-level data is unclear.

## 2.2. Student Success

As previously reported in our Access Agreements, the University is undertaking an ambitious university-wide initiative: 'Partners for Success'. This was launched in 2012-13 and has been further expanded in 2013-14.

Partners for Success incorporates a comprehensive Project Plan, divided into four main categories: Target Setting; Admissions and Transition; Student Engagement and Support; Employability and Employment. A Project Board has been formed to oversee the Partners for Success work and a Project Manager appointed to lead work in this area. Members of the Project Board, including Students' Union officers, meet with senior management teams within faculties and professional service areas to discuss progress and share good practice. Progress is also formally monitored through reports to Senate and as part of annual monitoring at programme, faculty and professional service level.

Partners for Success actions include:

- evaluation of previous work on transition and induction with development of student-delivered induction material. For example, the *Level Up* online support initiative, piloted from the point of confirmation in 2012 in the School of Media, has been extended to other areas of the University;
- the University is working closely with Birmingham City University Students' Union (BCUSU) to improve and expand on its offer during 'Welcome Week' in order to engender a greater sense of belonging to the University and contribute to improved retention;
- expansion of outreach work with key local FE providers;
- successful initiatives in Student Academic Mentoring are being expanded across the institution, including exploration of the potential roles for senior students in providing personal tuition for junior students;

- expansion of the work of ‘Student Success Advisers’ already being piloted in some faculties;
- enhanced co-ordination of mentoring initiatives through the Centre for Enhancement of Learning and Teaching
- programme teams being encouraged to develop new approaches which ensure full scope for personalisation of learning
- joint work with BCUSU seeking fuller roles for students in all aspects of curriculum design and delivery
- work in partnership with BCUSU to develop a full range of extracurricular activities aimed at enhancing employability
- encouragement of programme directors and other key programme teams to make better use of timely data on student performance, with early identification of those ‘at risk’;
- expansion of the Careers Team and adoption of an approach that places additional emphasis on work located in faculties closer to curriculum delivery;
- strategic review of employability, employment and enterprise throughout the university;
- expansion of our “OpportUNity” programme to exploit fully the range of employment opportunities on campus and the benefits of such employment for students;
- ensure for all students a work-related experience in each year of study;
- provide full support for students to ensure that they are able to develop and record their achievement of employability attributes;
- support students in preparation for employment through, for example, CV development and mock interviews;
- expansion of programme of activities to support students into graduate employment
- make available entrepreneurship support to all students and for three years after graduation

### 3. Monitoring and evaluation

Information about monitoring and evaluation against specific activities is included in the appropriate sections above.

We continue to adopt a more focussed approach than in the past, concentrating the resources available on outreach activities with evidence of success, whilst also seeking to analyse any issues associated with relationships which we perceive should be operating more effectively. We are continuing to develop the use of programme-level dashboard indicators and are reviewing our approach to module-level evaluation and monitoring. We have revised our planning process to ensure integration and alignment of action planning, target setting and monitoring, budgeting and investment decisions with the University’s new Strategic Plan.

The University has processes in place to routinely monitor a range of indicators at specified, planned times during the year using sophisticated techniques which identify any statistically significant variation in performance related to the protected

characteristics, student profile and background. All data relating to student participation, retention and progression are routinely reported to the University's Senate. Progress against the milestones set out in this agreement will be monitored by Senate, which already monitors progress against, and reviews the action plan of, the Widening Participation Strategic Assessment, which is also reported to HEFCE as part of the institution's annual monitoring.

The Students' Union has sabbatical officer membership of the Academic Standards and Quality Enhancement Committee, which will be monitoring progress against the action plans for progression and retention, and of Senate, which will be monitoring progress against the milestones set out in this Access Agreement.

Birmingham City University remains actively committed to equality and inclusion and increasing participation across all under-represented groups.

#### 4. Student communications

##### 4.1 Student Voice

The University has achieved significant recognition in the sector as a leader in student engagement and has continued to work closely with the Students' Union on a range of issues including, but not limited to, the level of fees charged. The Students' Union President is now a full member of the University Executive Group and therefore participates in debates and decisions on all important issues affecting the University and its students.

A number of informal meetings have been held with officers from BCUSU to discuss the principles and content of this Access Agreement. The President of the Students' Union has also been formally involved in the decision to standardise the fee for all full time first degree programmes at £9,000 through his membership of the Board of Governors and the University Executive Group.

More generally, a number of initiatives are under way aimed at enhancement of communication with students. As part of an HEA "Students as Partners" Change Initiative, BCUSU is delivering a Student Voice Project aimed at delivery of a range of outcomes to modernise the whole approach to capture of student views and enhancement of participation in University processes. One of these includes a reconstitution of the former Student Representation Coordination Group into a new Student Voice Group with wider representation and focus on delivery of the outcomes of the project.

Students' Union officers and the Head of Membership Engagement continue to work closely with the Director of Learning Experience and the Centre for Enhancement of Learning and Teaching to optimise the student role in academic development.

##### 4.2 Communication/information to prospective and current students

Clear, accessible and timely information on fees, loans, bursaries and scholarships is provided to applicants and students in a variety of ways:

- outreach staff, student mentors, student ambassadors and the course enquiry team provide information on fees, loans, grants, scholarships and bursaries as part of their outreach activity;

- specialist staff give talks and provide information on fees and financial support to prospective students, applicants and their families at Open Days and Applicant Visit Days;
- the University is committed to providing such timely information to UCAS and SLC as they reasonably require to populate their applicant facing web services;
- the University's website provides comprehensive information about course fees, scholarship schemes, bursaries, loans and grants and other financial support available to students. Guidance on additional course costs is provided together with an indication of accommodation costs. Visitors to the website can download a 'Money Matters' leaflet produced by Student Services which also acts as a gateway to other, more detailed information or can access the University's bespoke Student Calculator;
- our undergraduate and postgraduate prospectuses contain information on finance and links to further, more detailed information. They are available either in a printed version or as a downloadable PDF from our website;
- the University's Student Services department employs specialist Student Finance Advisers and Student Help Zone Advisers to provide information, advice and guidance on a wide range of money matters. This includes information about the funding available, support with applications for hardship assistance and help with budgeting and debt management. Students can access this support in person via regular drop-in sessions or by appointment; by phone or email; or via various online channels including a comprehensive intranet site and an e-guidance service. A wide range of printed materials supports this work, together with an online funding portal which enables students to search for appropriate additional funding from external trusts and charities;
- the work of Student Services is complemented by the Students' Union Advice Centre which offers information, advice and representation on a wide range of issues including money. Its trained, experienced advisers are available by telephone, email or by appointment.