

1. Introduction

Birmingham City University recognises that the decision to enter higher education is a life-changing one. However, for some of our prospective and current students, the decision is a harder one to make because of their personal circumstances. The UK Government, working with Higher Education Institutions, aims to minimise or remove the barriers to under-represented or disadvantaged students attending university and succeeding once there. At Birmingham City University, we aim to widen participation and support success in higher education in particular for students who:

- Have a low household income;
- Have a disability;
- Are from an ethnic minority;
- Are from an area with comparatively low participation in higher education (Low Participation Neighbourhoods);
- Are the first in their family to enter higher education; or
- Are highlighted by the Government as being from another under-represented group.

The ways in which we do this are split into three main areas: access (raising attainment and aspiration, primarily in schools and colleges, to enable young people to believe they can enter higher education); success (working to ensure that all students, whatever their personal circumstances, are able to gain the maximum benefit from their time at the University); and progression (enabling our students and graduates to achieve their desired goals upon completion of their course, whether entering employment or going on to further study).

2. Fee Levels

Following a range of policy changes and cuts to funding which have been announced since the 2015 Comprehensive Spending Review, including changes to the Disabled Students' Allowance and the move to a Student Premium, the University has experienced significant reductions in the amount of funding available to support activities relating to access, success and progression for students from disadvantaged or under-represented backgrounds, and for student hardship, all of which are critical elements to the nature of our student profile and mission as an inclusive University.

The decision has therefore been taken to raise fees in line with inflation (or to the maximum fee cap, dependent on the institution's Teaching Excellence Framework rating) for all full-time first-degree programmes and interim awards such as DipHEs for 2018/19 entry, in order to enable the University to protect and continue to enhance the student experience. Hence the fee for 2018/19 will be £9,250 subject to any further inflationary increase as approved by the government. It should be noted that much of the additional income to the University from fees will merely replace the income lost from other forms of funding. Fees for students entering the University in or before 2016/17 will not be raised, but students from later cohorts can expect to see their fees rise in line with inflation on an annual basis.

The maximum fee charged for HND, HNC and foundation degrees will also rise in line with inflation, but will be no greater than the lower fee cap (£6,165 in 2017/18).

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 institution will charge no additional tuition fee for Erasmus or periods of study abroad.

Accelerated degrees may be subject to fees higher than the maximum fee for traditional full-time first degree courses, but with a fee no higher than the maximum fee permitted by the Government.

The fees for part time courses have been set pro rata to the inflationary uplifted fee for full time courses for 2018/19. Under these arrangements no part time student will be charged more than 75% of the full-time fee (£6,935 in 2017/18).

3. Performance

Birmingham City University performs well both in absolute terms and by comparison to the adjusted sector benchmark in indicators of widening participation. Examination of the most recent HESA performance indicators reveals that:

- 97.7% of our young full-time undergraduate entrants come from state schools or colleges (above a benchmark of 95.7%);
- 14.2% are from low participation neighbourhoods (just above a benchmark of 14.0%).

Indicators of student success show that the University has:

- A non-continuation rate following year of entry (full-time first degree entrants) of 8.6% (better than a benchmark of 8.7%). This has increased from 2014/15, following a change in academic regulations, and is being closely monitored;
- A non-continuation rate of mature full-time entrants with no previous HE experience that remains better than benchmark at 10.3% (compared to a benchmark of 10.9% and a sector average of 12.3%).

Finally, a key indicator of progression is that:

- The proportion of full-time first degree entrants projected for neither award nor transfer is currently 11.8%, compared to a benchmark of 13.0%. Although better than benchmark, this figure has increased from last year (again related to the change in academic regulations), and is therefore also being closely monitored;

Consideration of equality and diversity is embedded into the University's day-to-day activity and is monitored by the Student Experience, Learning and Teaching committee, which maintains an overview of the University's performance with regard to improving student success. The committee receives a range of statistical analyses that explore significant relationships which may exist between student performance and the various 'protected characteristics' identified under the Equality Act 2010 for which data are held (age, gender, disability, sexual orientation, religion and belief, gender reassignment and race/ethnicity). The findings of the Student Experience, Learning and Teaching Committee have been taken into account when compiling this Access Agreement.

The University continues to undertake multivariate analysis to determine whether there are any subgroups of students that are underrepresented or underperforming in comparison to its recruitment pool and wider student body, and will implement any measures needed to resolve any issues discovered. Recent analysis has shown that certain groups of students, in particular those from low participation neighbourhoods or low income backgrounds, are significantly less likely to continue past their first year of study than their peers. A

significant amount of work is being undertaken to improve levels of student success, including retention and continuation rates (see section 4.2 for full details), focusing in particular on the first year experience, developing a sense of belonging within learning communities, and engaging students as active partners in their academic experience. These have been identified as key themes within the emergent new Learning and Teaching Strategy, which is currently expected to be implemented in 2017/18 and embedded in 2018/19 onwards.

The University welcomes HEFCE’s acknowledgement, as expressed through the replacement of the ‘improving retention’ element of the teaching block grant with a student premium, that recent reforms to the Disability Support Allowance (DSA) mean that this metric may not reflect the wider body of disabled students at an institution. This reflects our belief that the University’s performance against the HESA Performance Indicator relating to entrants in receipt of DSA is not representative of our student body, or of the efforts being made to increase inclusive practice that meets the needs of all students instead of providing bespoke support for individuals. The institution’s priority is to improve access, success and progression for all disabled students, rather than focusing solely on those in receipt of DSA.

The University has seen a 20% increase in the number of students enrolling with a disability between 2011/12 and 2015/16. This increase, although substantial, masks even greater increases in certain types of disability, including a 26% total increase of students with long-standing illnesses or health conditions and a 162% increase in students with mental health conditions.

	Total (UG FT students declaring a disability)	Two or more impairments	Specific Learning	Social/communication impairment	Long-standing illness or health	Mental health condition	Physical impairment or mobility issues	Deaf or serious hearing	Blind or serious visual	Disability, impairment or medical condition not otherwise classified	English HE Sector total (students declaring a disability)
2011 / 12	1443	41	921	25	185	113	37	37	29	55	113,416
2012 / 13	1424 (-1.3%)	40	894	27	193	125	37	34	17	57	120,066 (+5.9%)
2013 / 14	1518 (+6.6%)	42	933	42	196	155	38	29	21	62	127,686 (+6.3%)
2014 / 15	1682 (+10.8%)	62	956	48	232	207	48	32	25	72	133,640 (+4.7%)
2015 / 16	1734 (+3.1%)	77	869	64	233	296	54	40	27	74	146,760 (+9.8%)

Whilst this is a slower increase than the English sector total, it still directly contradicts the decline in the HESA Performance Indicator T7, which indicates that just 5.6% of our full-time first degree students claim DSA, down from 6.1% in 2014/15 and 6.8% in 2013/14. Ultimately, if disabled students are able to access higher education at Birmingham City University without needing to claim DSA, this would seem to be a positive indication of the institution’s inclusive learning environment and levels of student support.

Furthermore, analysis previously undertaken within the University shows that attainment of disabled students is comparable with that of non-disabled students, and that in some years, students with Specific Learning Difficulties have outperformed non-disabled students. We believe that this shows that we have a strong track record not only in enabling access for disabled students, but also in facilitating their success once here.

Our evaluation of the University's performance in relation to access and student success is that we have a demonstrable record of achievement in relation to widening access. 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 maintaining the increased level of expenditure on outreach activities.

We therefore intend to continue 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 existing regional collaborative activity that is delivered through Aimhigher West Midlands, University outreach activity, continuation of existing activities that have had a positive impact on increasing and supporting student retention, progression and achievement, as well as new activities to meet the same goals. Given the University's strong performance in enabling students from disadvantaged and underrepresented backgrounds to access higher education, all additional funding and activity will be focused on ensuring a similarly strong performance in student success rates. We also intend to continue expenditure on promoting access and support for disabled students, whether or not in receipt of the Disabled Students' Allowance, and we will meet all bursary commitments for continuing students. Expenditure on access and student success will increase from 2017-18 to reflect the changes to the Student Opportunity Allocation and removal of NHS funding for healthcare courses. Consideration will be given to the characteristics of the part of the student body becoming eligible for OFFA-countable funding as a result of the NHS funding changes (with substantially higher proportions than the University average of mature, female and commuter students, as well as those entering with only vocational qualifications) to ensure that any needs specific to that group are met.

4. Expenditure and Activity

4.1. **Access**

4.1.1. *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 and low participation neighbourhoods.

Many of the advice and guidance activities undertaken by the University's outreach team, including its generic ones, automatically capture disadvantaged learners. Our main catchment areas include a high proportion of learners from a widening participation background. Research from Aimhigher West Midlands 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 (NS-SEC 4-8), and no parental engagement in HE. The majority of the University's feeder

institutions are classed under this ranking by Aimhigher as 'High Priority'. In 2015/16, the University's outreach team worked with 278 priority schools and colleges, delivering 582 activities to 47,610 beneficiaries, broken down as follows.

16-18	24468
Primary	1160
KS 3	8171
KS4	8398
Adult	2204
Parents	1910
Teachers / Advisers	1299

The University is currently reviewing its Academies strategy. Whilst it is not possible to give details of any plans to increase activity in formal academy sponsorship at this point, pending this review, it should be noted that work in this area has grown over recent years. This began in 2011 with the University having acted as a founding sponsor for the Birmingham Ormiston Academy. Through this sponsorship, it provides high-quality opportunities for 14 to 19 year olds from across the region, and advice and support on curricular development. The Birmingham City University Academies Trust (BCUAT) was then established in 2012/13. This has a mission of "Transforming the prospects of children by providing inspirational learning experiences through excellence in teaching, teacher education, research and innovation". Sponsorship of City Road Primary Academy then began through BCUAT from the start of 2013/14, thereby raising the aspiration of primary school pupils (in an area which has been identified by HEFCE as being in Participation Gap Quintile 1) through sustained long-term outreach activity.

Other activities aimed at raising the attainment of school age children include the Junior Conservatoire and a Saturday Arts School. Both of these expose talented young people from all backgrounds to high quality facilities, experiences and tuition, with the Junior Conservatoire offering tuition and performance opportunities for children between the ages of 3 and 18.

A range of further interventions currently take place to raise attainment in schools, including residential summer schools for year 10 pupils, a mentoring programme and an annual teacher and advisor conference, and it is intended to continue to develop this work in the ways which evaluation proves most impactful. It is planned to grow activity in this area, and two projects are currently in development: delivery of a primary teachers' conference linked to the Birmingham Maths Hub (involving workshops and sessions on how to teach Maths effectively at primary school), and a pilot primary literacy programme involving students working on a 1:1 basis with pupils to improve their reading. All interventions are monitored through participant evaluation forms. Some of these activities aim to improve knowledge for the staff member. Associated benefits should flow from the primary maths activity in terms of improved pupil attainment. For the summer schools, evaluation of changed perception of attendees is considered. A reading age test is to be completed at the beginning and end of the literacy programme to monitor progress.

4.1.2. *Collaborative working between institutions*

Birmingham City University will continue the collaborative Aimhigher West Midlands partnership with Aston University, the University of Birmingham, the University of Worcester and Newman University. The partnership met its yearly milestones in 2015/16 and is on course to do so again in 2016/17. We therefore confirm our

intention to engage 1,000 disadvantaged young people in Aimhigher's intensive activity in each year from 2018/19.

As part of this collaborative programme, we will seek opportunities to extend and enhance our work with young people facing multiple dimensions of disadvantage. This will include support for children in care via our relationship with the Birmingham Virtual School.

We will align the management and delivery of this collaborative activity with that of our National Collaborative Outreach Programme consortia, monitoring the engagement of regional schools and colleges and the ages of the students we engage to ensure those outside the scope of the NCOP are not marginalised. We will also increase our efforts to engage schools and colleges in the region's only Opportunity Area (Stoke-on-Trent).

Birmingham City University will jointly fund Aimhigher with a contribution of £35,000 in 2018/19 and will be intimately involved in its governance and management. The outreach activities delivered through the partnership will complement our own extensive programme of widening access and fair access measures outlined elsewhere in this Agreement.

4.2. Student Success

The University continues to undertake a wide range of activity to support student success. This involves, among other activities:

- An evolving approach to work on induction, transition and first year experience that is informed by previous participation in the HEA's national 'What Works' Student Retention and Success initiative, including through implementation of a 'What Works' retention project. 'What Works' set out to develop and evaluate interventions aimed at enhancing a sense of belonging in participating students, and the University's work has received national recognition and is often featured by the HEA as an exemplar of best practice.
- Continued development of the Level Up online pre-transition initiative, delivered from the point of student confirmation of place into their first few months at university. This has now been adopted by an increasing number of Schools and programmes across the University;
- Appointment of Student Success Advisors in all Faculties. These roles, initially piloted in one Faculty from 2013, are undertaken on a full-time basis by recent graduates and serve to provide a wide range of informal support and bridging between students and staff. The role and numbers of graduates appointed has been rising with some Schools now recruiting their own. There are presently thirteen across the University;
- The Graduate+ initiative that seeks to align student personal development, employability and belonging. Through initial participation in activities such as Welcome Week, we seek to make sure that students make connections with staff and students across the university. Once connected, we then start to explore their sense of purpose and how we can help them develop the resources to achieve that. In the first year of operation over 5000 students registered for this extra-curricular award and we aim to double that number in the next few years. Early evaluative data suggests that a significantly higher proportion of BME students (51.3% vs 45%) are accessing the award programme and we need to better understand why that is happening.
- An integrated approach to Welcome Week delivering stronger induction to the wider University and alignment with Graduate+ initiative;
- Successful initiatives in Student Academic Mentoring (40 projects funded in 2016-17) are being embedded across the institution, including exploration of

the potential roles for senior students in providing personal tuition for junior students;

- Joint work with Birmingham City University Students' Union (BCUSU) seeking fuller roles for students in all aspects of curriculum design and delivery including through the Student Academic Partners programme, where students and staff work together to identify and resolve student experience issues;
- 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'.

The University was successful in being awarded by HEFCE call (circular 04/2015) to pilot and evaluate measures of learning gain. This partnership project is being led by Birmingham City University with partners at Coventry, Liverpool John Moores and Staffordshire. This work includes measures around student improvement in knowledge, skills, work readiness and personal development. It will be aligned to measures offered through the UK Engagement Survey.

Additionally, the University has been successful in attracting HEFCE Catalyst B funding as part of a regional university/FE colleges partnership (DRIVER). This initiative looks at a West Midlands approach to the BME attainment issue and how universities and colleges might learn from each other and share data to address BME attainment gap issues.

The University has increased its support for students to cope with the 'hidden costs' of Higher Education, by providing information on the types of additional costs that students may encounter. This activity complements activity that is being undertaken by the Students' Union. A Student Incentives Scheme, aimed at providing targeted support towards course materials and other costs which may be a barrier to study, is being introduced (subject to successful procurement) in 2017/18, and this will be continued into 2018/19. The Students' Union will be a fundamental part of decisions about which costs are the greatest barrier to access and progression, and what should be included as part of the scheme.

The University has well-established Disability and Mental Health/Counselling teams, who offer tailored support ranging from 1:1 sessions to a Life Skills Summer School for entrants with Autistic Spectrum Disorders. Furthermore, it has provided funding for the Students' Union to employ a Mental Health Awareness Coordinator to raise awareness of the internal and external services available for students. The services offered are regularly evaluated, and have been expanded over recent years where they have been successful. Demand for Counselling services continues to increase, with 1,138 referrals in 2015/16 and a current caseload of 1,614 students (including, but not exclusively, many students with mental health disabilities). The team deliver support using various models: from the traditional 1:1 and group sessions covering issues from anxiety management, relationships, and mindfulness, through to sessions delivered by external agencies (such as Forward Thinking Birmingham) in relation to CBT. The University acknowledges that students with a Specific Learning Difficulty (whether formally diagnosed or not) may find the transition to higher education challenging and therefore piloted a day of events and activities in September 2016 for new students to introduce the key skills required for study at HE level. A similar event, reaching even more new students will be run in 2017 and continued thereafter if shown to be effective.

The University wishes to support a range of students' learning differences, whether declared or not. In 2016/17 we will deploy two key assistive software packages on all open access machines, across all campuses. University staff are receiving training so that they can encourage students to utilise these facilities.

Finally, the University has recently completed a review of all of its undergraduate courses, with new and revised courses being introduced from September 2017. The underpinning academic strategy means that courses will be more flexible and more accessible for all students (including disabled, mature and part-time learners). The University also intends to expand its range of higher apprenticeships and other forms of work-based learning in order to facilitate access for all students, including those who are known to be less likely to enter more traditional forms of higher education, such as those from white socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

4.2.1. *Financial Support*

As in previous years, the University will continue to support students suffering hardship to at least the level previously funded by the Access to Learning Fund (ALF). Moreover, the University may choose to augment this sum and provide additional funding, dependent upon the specific nature of the applications received for hardship funding. The University continues to receive demand for hardship support from its students and the figure indicated is incremental to this ALF figure, and may rise as required to meet those needs.

The University recognises the potential barrier for many students of funding a Specific Learning Difficulty diagnostic assessment. We use the Hardship Fund to ensure that every enrolled home student who is referred for a diagnostic assessment receives financial assistance towards the cost of that assessment.

Regular monitoring of the profile of students accessing the Hardship Fund takes place, including against the protected characteristics; this is then reviewed by the University's Student Experience Learning & Teaching Committee.

4.3. **Progression**

In order to continue supporting the successful transition of our students out of the University and into graduate employment or further study, we will develop existing approaches through ensuring that:

- Graduate+ offers a personalised approach to student development at the university. Integration with key areas around Centre for Academic Success that delivers academic writing and numeracy support means that students get recognition for their addressing their own developmental needs. Graduate+ also enable students to be aware of the wide range of extra-curricular activities that are taking place across the University as we encourage them to consider how they might best design their own futures;
- We work in partnership with BCUSU to develop a full range of extracurricular activities aimed at enhancing employability and building community through Graduate+;
- The Careers Team approach is embedded in Faculties to support employability enhancements that are delivered through the curriculum and is aligned with Graduate+ work;
- Employment Advisers posts are embedded in each Faculty, dedicated to supporting students to achieve graduate-level employment or further study;
- Expansion of the University's student jobs scheme, OpportUNIty, to exploit fully the range of employment opportunities on campus and the benefits of such employment for students;
- All students are enabled to undertake a work-related experience in each year of study, in part through creation of new opportunities through Graduate+;
- Entrepreneurship support is available for all students and for three years after graduation.

5. Monitoring and evaluation

We continue to adopt a focused approach, 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. The use of programme-level dashboard indicators is becoming increasingly embedded within the University, and we are continuing to review our approach to module-level evaluation and monitoring by developing 'self-service' dashboards to complement the sector-level ones being produced by HEFCE. Our planning process ensures integration and alignment of action planning, target setting and monitoring, budgeting and investment decisions with the University's 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. Data relating to student participation, retention and progression are routinely reported to the University's Academic Board, and progress against the milestones set out in this agreement will continue to be monitored by Academic Board.

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

Aimhigher West Midlands undertakes comprehensive evaluation of the impact of its interventions, with reference to control and experimental groups. Evidence indicates that:

- Tracking suggests that engagement in Aimhigher during Key Stage 3 and 4 generates increased aspiration towards higher education, improved KS4 attainment and increased progress to higher education (HE);
- The proportion of Aimhigher-engaged Pupil Premium learners attaining 5 GCSEs at A* - C including English and maths exceeded that of regional Pupil Premium learners over the four years 2011/12 to 2014/15;
- The progression of Aimhigher beneficiaries into higher education is tracked via HESA data. Aimhigher learners formerly receiving Free School Meals (FSM) are more likely to enter higher education than non-Aimhigher FSM students (31.6% in 2014 and 36.7% in 2015). By comparison, regionally 22% of former FSM students entered higher education in 2014. Aimhigher learners from POLAR3 Quintile 1 postcodes also enter higher education in greater proportions than their peers (40.0% in 2014, compared to 12.4% regionally, and 32.40% in 2015, compared to 13.4% regionally).

There is evidence of increased volatility in national GCSE attainment and progression trends. National research¹ suggests that the Key Stage 4 curriculum reform will disproportionately impact on the attainment of disadvantaged learners, with January 2017 UCAS data showing a marked (2/3rd) reduction in the year-on-year growth in application rates of 18 year olds witnessed since 2012. As a result we intend to maintain our current ambitious milestones for both the GCSE attainment and HE progression of Aimhigher beneficiaries.

¹ <http://centreforum.org/live/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/education-in-england-web.pdf>

6. Student communications

6.1 **Student Voice**

The University is continuing with a number of initiatives that are aimed at enhancement of communication with students. The Students' Union President is a member of the Board of Governors, the University Executive Group and Academic Board and the Students' Union Chief Executive is a member of the University's Professional Services Group. The Students' Union have also been involved with the formulation of this Access Agreement.

BCUSU is delivering a Student Representation System designed to facilitate conversations between students and University staff. The system currently has over 700 students undertaking the role of Student Academic Leaders. The Student Voice Committee is a joint committee between the university and BCUSU that focuses on delivery of the outcomes of the Student Representation System. A system of Feedback Forums has been established to enhance the work of Boards of Studies, with Student Academic Leaders and School Representatives playing an active role.

Students' Union executive officers and the Union's Head of Engagement continue to work closely with the University's Centre for Excellence of Learning and Teaching to optimise the student role in academic development.

6.2 **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 Affairs 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 Affairs department employs specialist Student Finance Advisers and Student Affairs 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 Affairs 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.

The University has been a corporate member of the Plain English Campaign since 2015, demonstrating its commitment to clearer communication to students and prospective students. Training in how to write in plain English is available to relevant staff, and student-facing information (including, but not limited to, policies and procedures, information related to courses and assessments, and guides to our services) is being reviewed in line with plain English principles.