

COMMITTEE PAPER

Committee:	Student Experience Committee
Date of meeting:	28 May 2024
Agenda Item Title:	7A. The Big Deal and SU Participation – Interim Report April 2024
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Presenter:	Tristan Tipping, CEO, Bucks Students' Union

Executive Summary:

This paper updates SEC on the levels of participation and engagement that Bucks Students' Union have been able to record across the first and second terms of the 2023-24 academic year. The data reported includes all participation and engagement up to month end April 2024.

We can report strong levels of participation and engagement, with growth in many areas of our broad offer. This further demonstrates the unique nature of BNU's Big Deal and how, in partnership, we support the co-curricular experience, even in the face of a cost-of-living crisis which has been particularly impactful for students in the UK's HE sector.

By the end of the academic year we will, once again, be in a position to show how participation and engagement in co-curricular opportunities supports students' sense of wellbeing and belonging – contributing to more positive levels of continuation, completion, degree award and employability.

Compliance and Risk:

N/A

Action:

That the committee notes this report.

Appendices:

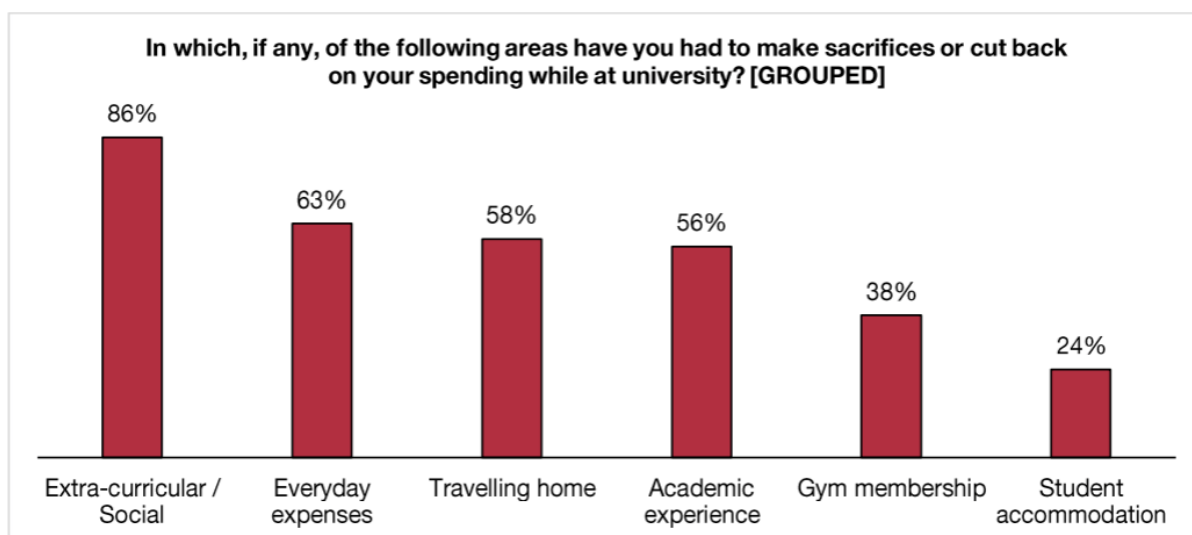
Appendix One: Action Plan Update

Consultation and Engagement:

With thanks to BNU's department of Strategic Planning and Change for support with data analysis. All data drawn from Tableau and correct as of 30 April 2024.

Background

1. We experienced pleasing growth in participation across Union services, activities and opportunities during the 2022-23 academic year, building on what were already sector leading levels of engagement. We began this academic year hoping to further improve our reach and relevance amongst the membership.
2. The sector is operating in an increasingly testing environment with many unions feeling the effects of the cost-of-living crisis impacting on their members social patterns, lack of disposable income and increased necessity to work. Ultimately, this has seen social activity and co-curricular programmes struggle in the face of competing priorities, presenting possible challenges with regards to student belonging, retention and, ultimately, achievement.
3. In a recent paper titled 'Navigating the cost-of-living crisis: A study on how rising living costs affect student engagement and retention in the UK,' published by Red Brick Research in January 2024, the pressure on the student pound is clearly illustrated.



4. However, contrary to what might be expected, here at BNU we have seen further growth in participation and engagement in the co-curricular offer, which is undoubtedly due to the breadth and accessibility of our unique Big Deal programme and the cost-of-living support delivered in the award-winning partnership between our institution and the Students' Union.
5. Further supporting the institution's forward thinking in leading the way in student support, WonkHE, the Higher Education think tank, published a paper in October 2023 titled 'Helping students with the cost-of-living pressure improves their sense of belonging' based on research they carried out with Pearson. In their paper, they cite links between financial pressures of study with the erosion of mental health, attendance and belonging-associated concepts like community, connections and confidence. At BNU we are taking significant steps to mitigate these impacts.
6. To this point of the year we have distributed **6,287 free meals** as part of the cost-of-living support package from The Lounge. This is an **increase of 11%** compared with the same

period in 2022-23. (Please note: this does not include figures from Uxbridge and Aylesbury from which the service is now delivered by G+G.)

7. Furthermore, across our other cost-of-living support projects – in which the free-to-access Big Deal programme most definitely contributes, but also extends to subsidised cafés, free meal programme, Monday Monthly Meals, the Re-Fill Station, Bucks New Usage, Help Yourself, etc., we have seen usage and demand grow considerably.
8. This level of demand for our cost-of-living support is mirrored in the increase in casework through our Advice Centres where we have seen **growth of 7% YoY** in casework and **growth of 24% YoY** in general advice, stretching our staff resource. We have witnessed a significant growth in students experiencing hardship/financial concerns for which they are seeking support.
9. Every year we conduct the Membership Survey, with a response target of 20% of the taught student population, asking respondents questions on various aspects of their student experience. The survey took place throughout January and February 2024 and received a total of 1,253 responses, which represents 19% of the BNU taught population. Below are the responses to some select questions.
10. Please note: this year we have followed the NSS methodology and removed the neutral option which will have likely contributed to the more positive responses of nearly all the question sets. However, it will give a set of results that will act as a more reliable insight in to likely NSS performance.
 - a) Do you know that, as a student at BNU, you are automatically a member of Bucks Students' Union?

2024 Membership Survey

Yes: 76%	No: 14%	Unsure: 10%
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2023 Membership Survey

Yes: 72%	No: 18%	Unsure: 11%
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A 4% improvement in this response takes us to the best response we've ever had for this question which we believe is partly due to the work we do around enrolment through the Big Conversation. It's our long-held belief that a more thorough understanding of our student's membership status, at the start of the University journey, supports the creation of a sense of belonging and will more likely encourage early engagement with co-curricular programmes. We have seen this positive correlation evidenced over the last two years.

- b) To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "The Big Deal, which includes free access to being part of a team or society, attending activities or going to events, additional skills sessions and trips, was a factor in my choosing to come to BNU."

2024 Membership Survey

Agree: 61%	Disagree: 18%	I have not heard of the Big Deal: 22%
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2023 Membership Survey

Agree: 53%	Neutral: 21%	Disagree: 13%	I have not heard of the Big Deal: 14%
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Once again, the most positive sets of results we have had for this question, with an 8% increase on 2023 and after a range of new initiatives to raise the profile of the programme during the application/conversion stages, demonstrates another element of the value of BNU's unique Big Deal package.

- c) What role, if any, did involvement in Big Deal activities (i.e., being part of a team or society, attending activities or going to events, additional skills sessions and trips) play in your decision to remain at BNU? [Answered by positive respondents to a question about considerations of leaving university]

	2024 survey	2023 survey
It was the main factor in my decision	15%	13%

With 15% of people answering this question stating that it was the main factor (13% in 2023), this may be an indicator of the added value of the Big Deal in a cost-of-living crisis but certainly points to the value of the co-curricular offer to the institution's retention efforts. This year, 33% of students indicated that the Big Deal at least played some part in their decision to remain at BNU.

- d) Were there any other services within the Students' Union (e.g., the Advice Centre) that influenced your decision to stay? [Answered by positive respondents to a question about considerations of leaving university]

2024 Membership Survey

Yes: 34%	No: 66%
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2023 Membership Survey

Yes: 34%	No: 66%
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- e) To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "I am satisfied with my overall Students' Union experience."

2024 Membership Survey

Agree: 94%	Disagree: 6%
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2023 Membership Survey

Agree: 76%	Neutral: 20%	Disagree: 4%
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Clearly, as with the NSS, removing the neutral option has resulted in respondents leaning more positively. However, as with the 2023 response, if this is translated to the NSS it will see Bucks Students' Union retain a top spot.

- f) To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "I am satisfied with my overall University experience."

2024 Membership Survey

Agree: 91%	Disagree: 9%
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2023 Membership Survey

Agree: 82%	Neutral: 12%	Disagree: 6%
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Once again, an incredibly strong performance for the University in this question. We used 2023's improvement in our survey to predict a positive NSS outcome last year and we look to be in a good place once again this year.

11. Each year, throughout January, we run a campaign called 'More Than a Bar' which is aimed at sharing the full breadth of our offer and value throughout the membership. We ask students to fill out comment cards describing why they believe us to be 'more than a bar' and it always generates some heart-warming responses, giving us valuable insights into what the members most appreciate about our Union. This year, we received 1,034 submissions, which represents a 11.42% increase on last year. Here's a selection of the comments:

"They provide free support, free food, most importantly, proper guidance with my education."

"They give you loads of different volunteering opportunities. You get to sign up to so many different clubs and societies and it gives you a chance to meet more people and it's all free thanks to the Big Deal."

"The Sabbs work hard to create an inclusive community within the Student's Union and the Uni."

"It provides students with great support for employability and really helps with the cost of living."

"it's amazing! there's always nights out no matter what day it is. Nights out are the best, especially frat night as so many society's get together and have socials and also you get to meet so many new people. SU is a safe place, no matter who you walk past you get a smile and people are just so welcoming and friendly."

"Union helps me a lot to get over my loneliness, gives me the advice and talk to me how to make friends, which event I should join, what I should do to feel better."

12. Recommendations from the research for future action by the Students' Union

- a) **Barriers to participation:** when asked about why our members have not been able to get as involved as much as they would like, some of the top responses indicate that timings of activities might conflict with other commitments or that the individuals do not know anyone else. We should investigate this further and explore options for the timings of our activities and endeavour to align these better to the student body. We could tailor our communications around activities, encouraging our members to get involved even if they do not know anyone else.
- b) **Contacting the officers:** a new question for this year's survey asked respondents if they know how to contact the officers of the Students' Union. Although 63% answered this positively, there is still room for improvement and to continue putting them front and centre in everything that we do. Central to this is our communication networks, more specifically our summer/pre-freshers' mailings, and ensuring that the officers feature prominently in these.
- c) **Understanding of the Union:** when asked the question 'I have a good understanding of what the Students' Union does on a day-to-day basis', 69% answered this positively (56% in 2023). It could be argued that this has room to improve and should be delivered through more proactive action from all teams. We still do not always shout loud enough about some of our achievements and should utilise all available channels to amplify what we do on behalf of our members, even if it is small 'wins'. A large part of this could be driven through the elected officers and being more explicit in what they do on behalf of the membership through University meetings, etc.
- d) **Membership:** although 79% of our members know that they are a member (78% in 2023), there is still the opportunity to improve this. To enable this, we should continue to speak to the students in such a way that they understand that they are a member and the value that this offers to them. This would be largely driven through our communications channels and should start straight from our pre-arrival materials and driving this as a step-change in our tone of voice.
- e) **Withdrawing from the University:** on asking the question about students dropping out of the University, those that selected 'other' as an option have described frustration at some basic academic tenets. For instance, some students have noted management of the course, disorganisation, and lack of support from academics and staff. These are aspects where we continually challenge the University and should tenaciously continue to do so.
- f) **The future:** in terms of what students would like to get more involved with us in the future, this largely focuses around academic (48%), professional (48%) and personal development (44%). We should investigate ways to expand the work that we already do in this area, potentially looking at how we can scale it up, and investigating opportunities to further broaden what we offer. We might be able to explore this further at enrolment stages, where we carry out The Big Conversation, but new students may not be able to fully articulate the types of activities that they would want at such an early stage of joining the University.

Key Findings

General Engagement and Participation

13. Overall, it has been an incredibly busy and successful academic year. However, further to the last report to the SEC committee, we are still noticing increased demand for some of our services, and this is having a significant demand on resources, where we must carefully balance meeting demand and managing member expectations. Furthermore, our teams do an incredible job in matching the needs of an increasingly diverse membership.
14. The increased cost-of-living evidentially remains a significant factor on student life. Behaviours and social patterns are changing, and our members are gravitating even more readily to low cost/free opportunities, becoming more involved with community-based activities (societies, volunteering, clubs). As such, they are becoming more reliant on programmes like the Big Deal to meet their extra and co-curricular needs.
 - a) Overall participation and engagement in all Students' Union services, programmes and activities, that we can measure, has increased from 60.12% of the BNU taught student population, for the same period in 2022-23, to **62.24% (4,821 individual students)**. This represents a YoY increase of **2.07%**.
 - b) For Big Deal opportunities specifically, participation and engagement has risen from 34.89% of the BNU taught student population, for the same period in 2022-23, to **36.70% (2,843 individual students)**. This represents a YoY increase of 3.72%.
 - c) A total of **88.38% of full-time undergraduates** have recorded participation in general Union services (3,697 individual students) while **54.43% have engaged with the Big Deal** to date (2,277 individual students).
 - d) Over **85% of the current international student cohort** have engaged with Union services, received support or participated in activities, with **53.56% actively participating in Big Deal opportunities** thanks to the roll out of 'The Big Deal: International' programme which continues to grow from strength to strength.
 - e) Following on from our previous report to SEC, in February 2024, we have seen further growth in participation from a range of communities, including:
 - a. One of our target areas, the School of Aviation and Security has enjoyed a YoY **improvement of 6.11%** in general participation and engagement and 5.22% growth in Big Deal participation.
 - b. In 2022-23, at this point last year, 63.39% students from the BAME community had recorded participation in general Union services and activities and this has **risen to 70.23%** in 2023-24 (87.07% for FTUGs).
 - c. In 2022-23, at this point last year, 30.96% students from the BAME communities recorded participation in Big Deal activity and this has **risen to 36.51%** in 2023-24.

- d. Students in the young category are participating more actively from 55.06% in general Union services and activities, at this point last year, to 81.78% this year, with **Big Deal participation increasing from 35.70% to 64.07%**.
- e. It is also pleasing to report that **85.58% of mature students from the FTUG population** are now engaging, which is an extremely healthy figure.
- f. Across taught students, we are again performing strongly with participation from students from IMD quintiles 1 and 2 whose engagement with the general Union offer (67.16%) is higher than their peers from quintiles 3, 4 and 5 (54.15%). These students are also slightly more likely to engage with the Big Deal programme than their peers from quintiles 3,4 and 5 (34.54% quintiles 1 and 2 compared to 33.61% quintiles 3, 4 and 5).
- g. **95.85% of FTUGs from IMD quintiles 1 and 2 have recorded** participation with the Union to date (86.38% for FTUG students from quintiles 3,4 and 5). For participation across all services and programmes, for BNU taught students, students in IMD quintile 1 show the highest level of participation (72.56%) against participation levels of 49.48% in IMD quintile 5. The populations participation to date is 62.24% (an increase of 2.12% compared to last year). This performance is replicated when we isolate the Big Deal, where students from IMD quintile 1 show the highest levels of participation.
- h. Students who identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community are participating at more advanced levels than their peers with 74.50% in general Union services and 53.92% in Big Deal activities.
- i. In 2023-24, **94.01% of our LGBTQ+ FTUG students have recorded engagement with the Union's general services and 70.83% with the Big Deal.**
- j. Of students with known disabilities, 73.15% have recorded participation with general Union services, against a participation rate of 60% for those with no known disability.
- k. Of students with known disabilities, 50.84% have recorded participation with Big Deal activities against a participation rate of 33.96% for those with no known disability.
- l. **Of FTUG students with known disabilities, 91.69% have recorded participation** with general Union services against a participation rate of 87.96% for those with no known disability.
- m. Of FTUG students with known disabilities, 65.83% have recorded participation with Big Deal activities against a participation rate of 51.68% for those with no known disability.

15. Our top five performing programmes: we have witnessed the largest measurable growth in participation in the following areas of activity:

- Volunteering up by 71.81%
- Additional Skills up by 55.31%
- Societies up by 51%
- Recreational Activities up by 47.61%
- Sport for Fun up by 33.40%

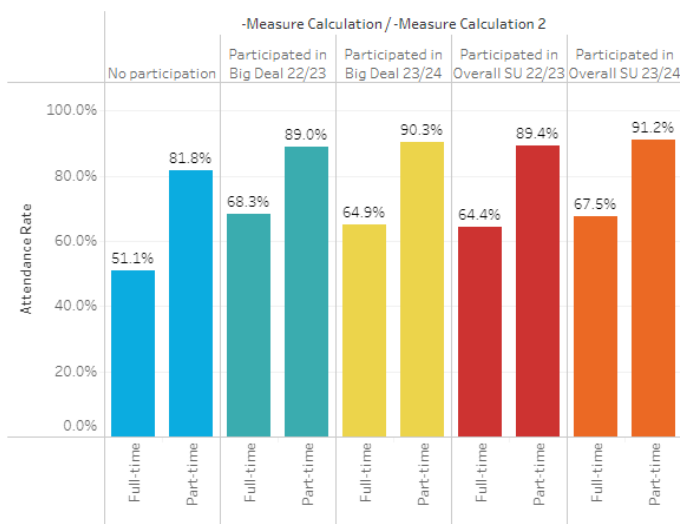
With an honourable mention to The Leadership Academy which we have grown by over 100% (from 28 in 2022-23 to a cohort of 64 in 2023-24). All the Big Deal programmes are in growth as a percentage of the student body.

16. We have continued to see strong growth in our community volunteering and, so far, students have recorded **5,029 hours** supporting local causes, groups and projects compared to 3,890 hours at the same point last year, representing **an increase of 29.28%** in hours contributed.

17. Across all volunteering, including the internally driven opportunities, students have recorded **16,632 hours** in 2023-24 against a figure of 16,519 hours this time last year with unique student participation **growing by 71.81%**.

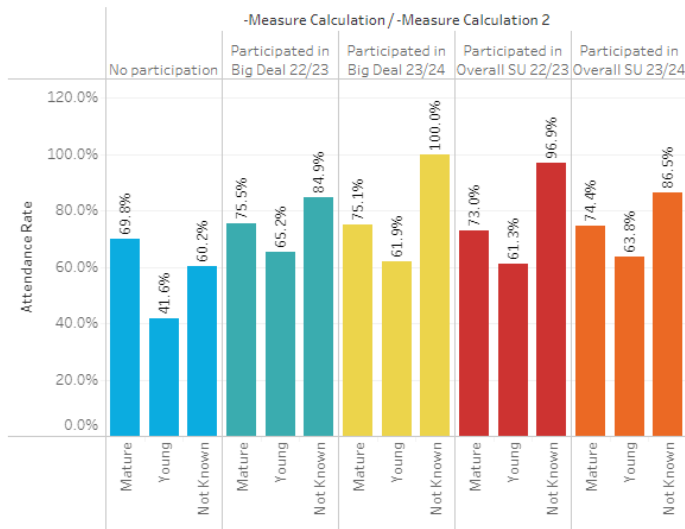
Positive links to attendance

18. The following graphs show that those participating in Union-led programmes and services, most commonly, have higher rates of attendance. In the graphs below, this is split further into different demographic groups, including mode of study, age, IMD, ethnicity and *all* students.

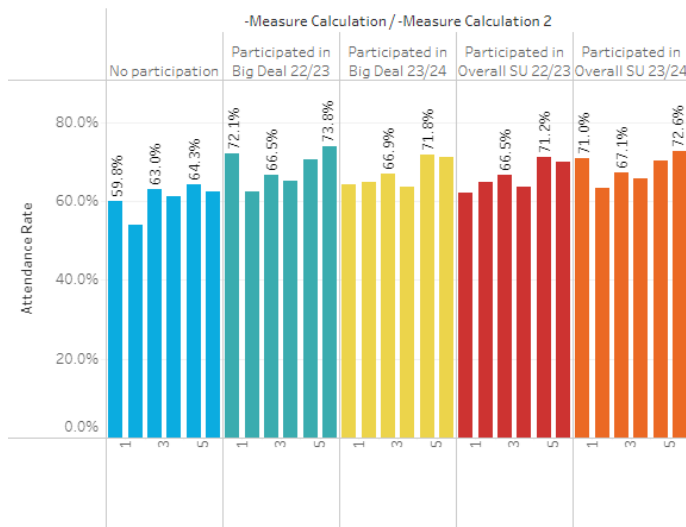


No participation versus participation, in both overall Union and Big Deal, measured against attendance data and **mode of study** (full-time and part-time)

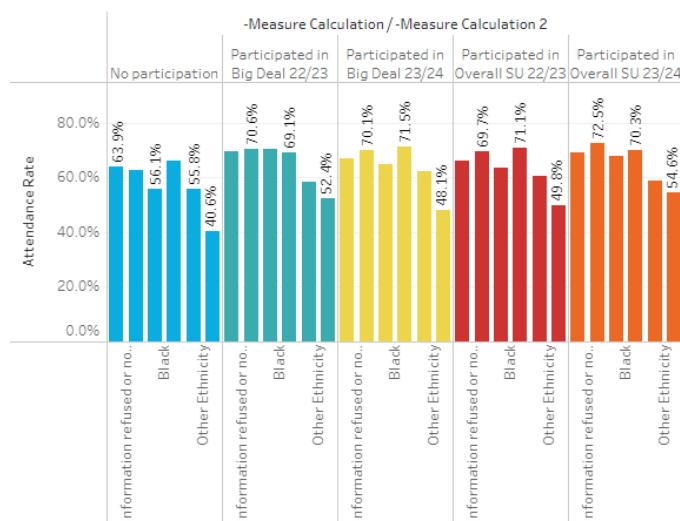
Buckinghamshire New University



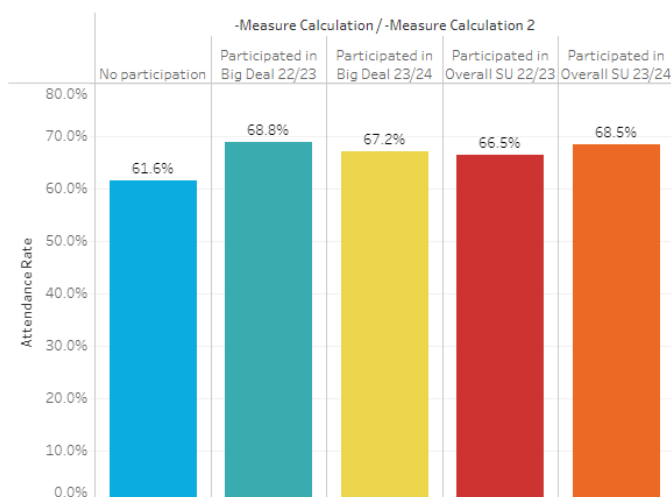
No participation versus participation, in both overall Union and Big Deal, measured against attendance data and **age** (young and mature)



No participation versus participation, in both overall Union and Big Deal, measured against attendance data and **IMD quintiles**



No participation versus participation, in both overall Union and Big Deal, measured against attendance data and **ethnicity**



No participation versus participation, in both overall Union and Big Deal, measured against full attendance data for **BNU taught students**

Action Plan Progress

19. Reporting to this committee in October 2023 and February 2024, we committed to trial new initiatives, working with appropriate representatives to devise interventions, events, activities and developmental opportunities, focused around supporting a number of student groups where lower levels of participation and engagement was married with less positive performance data.
20. Looking at the data from two full terms, we can see encouraging signs of some progress in most areas and are reasonably confident of hitting our targets at the end of the academic year, with the expectation that more positive levels of participation and engagement with the co-curricular experience will support student success.
21. The groups identified for the action plan were:

- a) Female students with disabilities
- b) Female students from our Asian community
- c) Male students from IMD quintiles 1 and 2
- d) Students from the School of Aviation and Security (all Union services) and Business and Law (specifically Big Deal activities)
- e) Apprentice learners

22. A table of performance to date against the action plan targets can be found in **Appendix one: Action plan update 2023-24**.

EDI initiatives showing positive impact

23. We believe that some of our progress with students from diverse communities has been supported by changes that we have made in our wider organisation and a staff team that is becoming ever more representative of our membership. These changes included revisions to recruitment procedures which were implemented early in the calendar year of 2023, such as:

- More accessible application process
- Guaranteed interview scheme for candidates of colour and/or declaring a disability
- Issuing interview questions in advance

Our latest figures show:

- 45% of student staff applications were from BAME candidates – up from 11% in on the previous year
- 15% of student staff applications were from students with disabilities
- 55% of student staff applications were from candidates identifying as female – up from 48%
- 50% of career staff applications were from BAME candidates – up from 27%
- 66% of career staff applications were from candidates identifying as female – up from 33%

Currently the Students' Union employs 34 career staff, equivalent to 31.29 FTE:

- 14 (41%) career staff identify as male (13.62 FTE) and 20 (59%) identify as female (17.67 FTE)
- 6 (18%) career staff, equivalent to 5.19 FTE, are identified as Black or Asian
- 4 (12%) career staff, equivalent to 3.62 FTE, have declared a disability

The student staff team for this academic year currently consists of 85 atypical employees:

- 45 (53%) student staff identify as Black or Asian
- 9 (11%) student staff have declared a disability
- 33 (39%) student staff identify as male, 50 (59%) identify as female, 1 as non-binary and 1 prefers to use another term

Summary

24. Levels of engagement after two full terms are extremely encouraging which enables us to remain optimistic with regards to meeting our end of year targets.
25. The competition for our members time and attention remains significant. Work commitments and managing the cost of living remains the priority for many, leading the Union staff team to innovate by continuously refreshing the programme of opportunities and developing creative solutions to meet student needs.
26. During the summer months, we will, once again, be able to work with colleagues from Strategic Planning and Change to draw out the positive connections between the growing levels of participation and engagement and student success including attendance, continuation, progression and achievement alongside the datasets we have built over the last two years.

Actions

27. The committee is asked to note the findings in the paper, in advance of the full analysis being available in June/July 2024.

Appendix One: Action Plan Update 2023-24

Levels of participation and engagement (as a percentage of that population)	All Union opportunities			Big Deal opportunities		
	Full year 2022-23	To date	Target 2023-24	Full year 2022-23	To date	Target 2023-24
Female students with disabilities	63.33%	65.10%	80%	51.79%	57.49%	65%
Female students from our Asian community	51.07%	52.23%	70%	30.38%	36.76%	45%
Male students from IMD quintile 1	56.83%	63.74%	70%	47.25%	53.66%	60%
Male students from IMD quintile 2	52.52%	59.25%	70%	41.16%	46.57%	60%
Students from the School of Aviation and Security (all Union services)	20.24%	33.12%	50%	13.28%	22.03%	35%
Apprentice learners	23.25%	35.75%	50%	17.22%	18.47%	30%
School of Business and Law (specifically Big Deal activities)	52.93%	100%+*	80%	20.60%	56.58%	60%

All presented figures are a percentage of the taught/BNU population. All data drawn from Tableau and correct as of 7 May 2024.

*Due to students changing course or withdrawing.