

**UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM**

**POLICY ON CONSULTATION WITH STUDENTS**

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## Policy on Consultation with Students

### 1. Introduction

- 1.1 Students play an important role in shaping their own educational experience, and are major stakeholders in the University's operations and decision-making processes. They experience the frontline impact of changes to programmes and modules, Principal Academic Units (PAUs) or Departments, Professional Services, facilities and the University's organisational structure.
- 1.2 Provision of a student perspective is recognised as being an important contribution to decision-making within the University. For this reason, students are formally represented on decision-making committees of the University; and when changes are planned that will affect students' educational experience, consultation with students is an important part of the process.
- 1.3 The Quality Assurance Agency's UK Quality Code for Higher Education (2018) requires higher education providers to "actively engage students, individually and collectively, in the quality of their educational experience". The University must also comply with consumer protection law in relation to the provision of information to students, taking into account guidance provided by the [Competition and Markets Authority](#).
- 1.4 This Policy sets out the University's approach to consulting students on changes that may affect their education, including when the change will conflict with information previously made available to them. This information may have been provided through the University website, in a programme handbook, in material made available with an offer letter, or through another mechanism.
- 1.5 The Policy is also intended to help students to understand the kinds of changes that they may encounter during their studies, and the level of consultation that they can expect depending on the nature of the change.

### 2. Purpose of Consultation

- 2.1 The purpose of student consultation is to provide as accurate and complete information as possible and collect feedback from various groups of students who may be affected by a change.
- 2.2 The reason for the consultation will normally fall into one of two categories:
  - (a) consultation to determine whether a change should be made;
  - (b) consultation to determine how to manage the impact of a change.

The consultation process described in this Policy should be considered as the minimum consultation required, and consideration should be given to whether additional consultation is appropriate in the circumstances.

- 2.3 Collated feedback to this consultation should be analysed and the University should address the concerns that are raised and, where necessary and possible, adjust plans. The consultation process should take place before final plans are confirmed and final decisions are made, as part of its purpose is to shape those plans and decisions.

### 3. Applicability and Exceptions

- 3.1 This Policy applies to academic Colleges, PAUs and Departments, Professional Services and central management.
- 3.2 This Policy applies to consultation with students at all levels and on all modes of study, including undergraduates, postgraduate taught students and postgraduate researchers, and students studying by distance learning. It also applies to consultation with prospective students who have applied, been offered and/or accepted a place to study at the University.
- 3.3 For the avoidance of doubt, this Policy applies only to academic issues and the broader educational experience of students but not to changes to non-academic facilities and services such as accommodation and sport (where alternative processes would apply).
- 3.4 Exceptions to this policy will necessarily apply where a change is considered to be unavoidable due to factors outside the University's control; for example, changes made by the Home Office regarding visa requirements for overseas students.<sup>1</sup> In such cases, students will normally be informed of the change rather than consulted.

#### **4. Types of Change**

- 4.1 Examples of different types of change are set out in accompanying guidance, together with the level of consultation that students can normally expect.

#### **4.2 Changes to Programmes and Modules**

- .1 Changes to programmes and modules are the type of change that students are likely to encounter most frequently. Changes may need to be made to programmes and modules for a variety of reasons, including certain 'unavoidable' changes (see 3.4). Additionally, changes will often arise from a judgement that the change is in the academic interest of students; for example, to meet requirements of an accrediting body or to keep programme contemporary by updating practices or areas of study.
- .2 The University has [processes](#) in place through which changes to programmes and modules are proposed and approved. These processes require consultation to be undertaken with students where necessary. As an example, 'Exceptional' or 'Major' modifications to programmes (defined in [supporting guidance](#)) (i.e. significant changes such as those affecting compulsory modules, programme title or award) are more likely to involve student consultation than 'Minor' modifications to programmes, which by definition are unlikely to have a material impact upon students.

#### **4.3 Programme Withdrawal (Course Closure)**

The University also has [processes](#) in place through which programme withdrawals are proposed and approved, and which also require consultation to be undertaken with students where necessary. If a programme is being withdrawn, the University will normally continue teaching on the programme ("teach out") until all affected students have completed their studies, thereby minimising the impact upon students. The University's

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<sup>1</sup> Unavoidable changes include those made because of circumstances outside the reasonable control of the University, such as a key member of staff leaving or being unable to teach (where the programme or module is reliant on that person's expertise) or where the minimum or maximum number of students needed to ensure a good educational or student experience has not been met or has been exceeded. Other circumstances outside the reasonable control of the University include an unexpected lack of funding, severe weather, fire, civil disorder, political unrest, government restrictions or serious concern about the transmission of serious illness making a course unsafe to deliver.

[Student Protection Plan](#) sets out the measures in place to protect students in the unlikely event that a risk to the continuation of their studies should arise.

#### 4.4 Other Changes

Other changes that may require student consultation are those likely to have a material impact on the educational experience of a cohort of students (for example, an organisational or policy change that will affect teaching, learning and supervisory arrangements<sup>2</sup> or other significant aspects of the student educational experience).

- 4.5 Where a policy change is proposed (i.e. a change to University legislation such as Regulations or Codes of Practice), consideration will be given to whether the change should be implemented for all student cohorts (i.e. all existing and future students) or only for future cohorts who have not yet commenced their studies. If students are likely to consider the change to be beneficial to them because it will have a positive impact upon their experience, it is likely that – in consultation with the Guild of Students – the change would be implemented for all student cohorts.

### 5. **Processes for Consultation**

#### 5.1 Changes to Programmes and Modules

- .1 The expectations relating to consultation with prospective/current students about changes to programmes and modules are detailed in a supporting guidance document for staff.
- .2 Changes to programmes are subject to deadlines, depending on the aspect of a programme that is being changed (i.e. compulsory modules or optional modules). The deadlines are determined with due reference to UK consumer law, and are stated in the supporting guidance document for staff.
- .3 Staff are required to assess the potential impact on prospective/current students of any changes to programmes and modules being made after the specified deadlines, and use this assessment to determine the most appropriate type of consultation with students (e.g. communicating the change to students and providing a right to reply, or requesting students' consent to the planned change).
- .4 The relevant PAU (or, if more appropriate, the relevant professional services department) will be responsible for managing the consultation process. In each instance, the process will be proportionate to the change being made.
- .5 Where consultation with prospective/current students takes place, all those affected by the change should be included and have the opportunity to respond. As indicated in 5.1.3, there are two key types of consultation that may take place:
  - (a) Communicating with a right to reply: Communicating a change which is not considered to be particularly significant (e.g. the impact on prospective/current students may be either advantageous or neutral), providing information about it and giving those affected an opportunity to submit any comments they may have.

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<sup>2</sup> For further information about supervisory arrangements, please refer to the Code of Practice on the Supervision and Monitoring Progress of Postgraduate Researchers (clause 2.24).

- (b) Seeking consent: For more significant changes (e.g. where the impact on prospective/current students is potentially disadvantageous), consent may be sought from those affected. However, it may sometimes be necessary to implement the change even if consent has not been received from all affected students; for example, if the change is judged to be in the academic interests of students (see 4.2.1).

The type of consultation chosen will depend on the situation and the level of risk involved.

- .6 PAUs should use the consultation responses to determine whether or not the change should be made and/or inform action to be taken to manage the impact of change. Students should be informed of the outcome of the consultation.

Consultation with students, if in writing, must only be undertaken using the institutional Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), University email and/or other institutionally approved platforms. Communication must not be undertaken through social media, messaging apps or any other platforms that are not approved for this purpose and supported by the University.

## 5.2 Programme Withdrawal (Course Closure)

Where a 'teach out' is to take place, the processes pertaining to changes to programme and modules (see 5.1.1 – 5.1.6) will normally apply and, if action is required, the primary focus is likely to be managing the impact on the student experience during the 'teach out' period. In the rare circumstances that a 'teach out' is not possible, the [Student Protection Plan](#) would be utilised.

## 5.3 Other Changes

- .1 When a change is likely to have a material impact on the educational experience of a cohort of students, information about the change should be circulated by the University (e.g. the relevant PAU) to the Education Officer in the Guild of Students<sup>3</sup> initially (normally at the earliest available opportunity<sup>4</sup>).
- .2 Information should then be circulated (by the University) to the students affected by the change in a timely manner. It may also be appropriate to circulate information to Student Representatives/Staff Student Committees within the PAU or Department/programme affected by the change, for onward circulation to affected students through their usual methods of communication. However, this will not normally be the sole or primary mechanism for the circulation of information. The Guild will also advertise the information through its website.
- .3 The information provided will make clear who is responsible for the consultation, normally the area of the University responsible for making the change. There should normally be one month between publication of information to the affected students and the deadline for feedback, although an alternative deadline may be agreed

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<sup>3</sup> The email address [education@guild.bham.ac.uk](mailto:education@guild.bham.ac.uk) may be used. For students studying at the University's overseas campuses the responsibilities of the Guild of Students will be undertaken through the appropriate local student representation system.

<sup>4</sup> Depending on the nature of the change, it may be also appropriate for the relevant PAU to consult affected students directly (either in addition to, or instead of, circulation to the Guild of Students). PAUs may contact Registry (via [legislationqueries@contacts.bham.ac.uk](mailto:legislationqueries@contacts.bham.ac.uk)) for advice on the most appropriate course of action.

between the Guild and the University if appropriate, i.e. this process should be applied proportionately.

- .4 Student responses to the consultation will be collated by the University as one coherent document and circulated to the Guild. The collective response will normally be provided within two working weeks of the deadline for feedback.
- .5 The University should consider and respond to the document, addressing the concerns within the students' feedback. The University's detailed response to that feedback should be made available to the Guild and the affected students within a month of submission and demonstrate that concerns have been taken into account in subsequent plans wherever possible.
- .6 The University will endeavour to ensure that the consultation process does not fall entirely within a period of student vacation from the University; only under exceptional circumstances would this occur, and the University would advise the Guild of the reasons for this.
- .7 After final proposals are confirmed and approved, engagement with students should continue during any implementation stage.

## **6. Provision of Information and Level of Detail**

- 6.1 It is understood that some information cannot be provided to the Guild/students, as it would affect staff and their individual jobs. Notwithstanding that restriction, appropriate information should be provided to the Guild/students in order to illustrate the scale and implications of a change.
- 6.2 Consideration should be given to the most appropriate format for consultation, taking into account the needs of any students with a disability.

## **7. Concerns**

- 7.1 Should a student have concerns about the outcomes of a consultation, they may raise this with their PAU or the most appropriate person depending on the nature of the change being implemented, and may wish to refer to the Code of Practice on Student Concerns and Complaints. Students may also raise concerns or seek support from the Guild, either through a Guild Officer or through [Guild Advice](#).