



Freedom to Achieve

**Student Voice Summary
2019**

1. Introduction

The Freedom to Achieve project is DMU's commitment to ensure that everyone, whatever their background, can achieve their potential and can see themselves and people like them reflected in the institution. The project is a multi-faceted programme with a number of individual projects designed to enhance our cultural diversity and support success for all. The project was designed with a different focus for each year.

- ▼ **Year One:** understanding the VA metric and ICF and how they can be integrated into existing DMU pedagogic practices. Disseminating these approaches across the 40 programmes and working with programme teams to explore their attainment gap data.
- ▼ **Year Two:** beginning to implement curriculum change across the 40 programmes and more widely across the institution. Engaging in co-creation with our students to ensure that their voice is heard throughout this process.
- ▼ **Year Three:** Embedding changes in practice at both an institutional and programme level to ensure that culturally inclusive practice is considered 'business as usual' at DMU.

This report shares the outcomes of the student voice strand of the project work: our programme-level student consultation co-creation sessions and the 2019 edition of the Freedom to Achieve Student Voice Survey.

As the Freedom to Achieve project is coming to an end, the findings of the student voice strand of the project demonstrate that for continued success in closing the attainment gap, DMU needs to not only address teaching, learning and assessment methodologies and ideologies but needs to develop a much broader, institution wide approach to better understand, appreciate and challenge the factors which contribute to there being an attainment gap.

2. Student Consultation

Between November 2018 and April 2019, the Freedom to Achieve team collaborated with the 40 pilot programmes to hold a series of student consultation events. The aim of these sessions was to initiate cultural conversations between staff and students and to act as a gateway to future co-creation around the points students raised. The sessions were structured using the four key themes generated from the institution-wide events held in January and February 2018 (Atkins 2018):

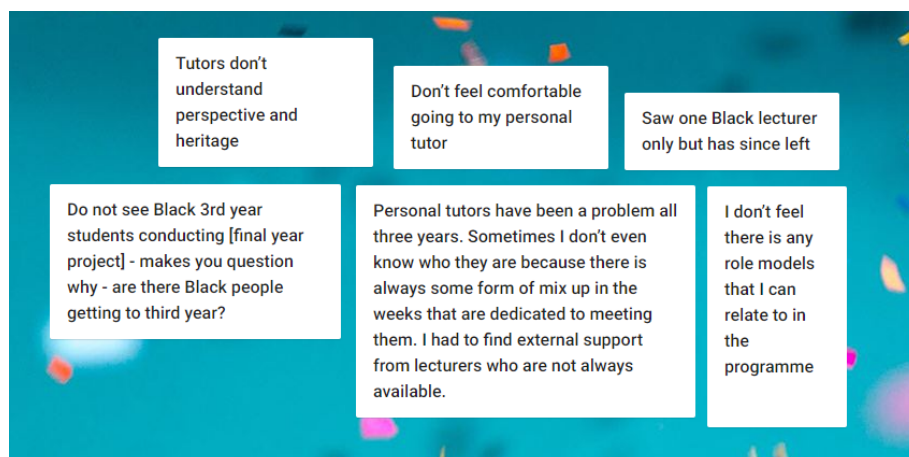
- ▼ Relationships
- ▼ Teaching and Learning
- ▼ Development
- ▼ Community

Over the six months of sessions, the team worked with a total of 310 students. Those in attendance were most often in their second year (40%), female (65%), not disabled (85%), students of colour (50%). Of the 40 pilot programmes, a total of 27 were successful in hosting a session. Where sessions were unsuccessful this was primarily due to issues in communicating the value of engagement to students, which resulted in lack of attendance for the sessions.

The key topics arising from the consultations are shared below, organised by the four overarching project themes.

2.1 Relationships

During the sessions three key themes arose within the Relationships strand: Student integration (86% of sessions), student-staff relationships (77% of sessions), role models (73% of sessions) and personal tutoring (68% of sessions).



▼ Student Integration

Students primarily spoke about a lack of integration between student groups, both generically and specifically in relation to ethnic groups. This was primarily demonstrated through students' physical location within the learning space and a lack of interaction outside of learning sessions. Of particular interest was the impact this had on students, a number of whom noted that they "had no way to make friends". Given the known influence of sense of belonging on student retention, progression and attainment, this perceived lack of integration is clearly significant.

Students also made several suggestions regarding how student integration may be supported. These included: practical activities such as projects, icebreakers and team building exercises to encourage students to learn more about one another; social events during induction alongside academic induction activity; and, grouping students at the beginning of the year but then changing these groupings termly to allow for more integration.

▼ Role models

Students were mostly concerned by the lack of role models available to them. Where this was highlighted it was commonly in relation to a lack of role models who represented the students in terms of their ethnicity, gender or career interests. In response to this, students were particularly keen to see role models in the form of more senior students and alumni. These were seen as role models to whom students could easily relate and who could share their journeys and help students to see how they could progress from University into their career.

Guest speakers were also seen as valuable where they were able to make links between University study and industry. Students felt that guest speakers provided the opportunity to learn about the career paths open to someone who had their degree. Students also spoke of a desire to access mentors within the institution, for both personal and professional guidance.

▼ Student-Staff Relationships

Approachability of staff was clearly important to students; where staff are approachable students notice and value this and likewise, where staff are not seen as approachable students were very aware of this. Students suggested that they like to know more about their programme team's

backgrounds – where students knew about staff career paths, they were more likely to be seen as role models and as someone they could relate to. Meanwhile, where students felt patronised and unsupported by lecturers or where they didn't feel their perspective could be understood, they were most likely to disconnect.

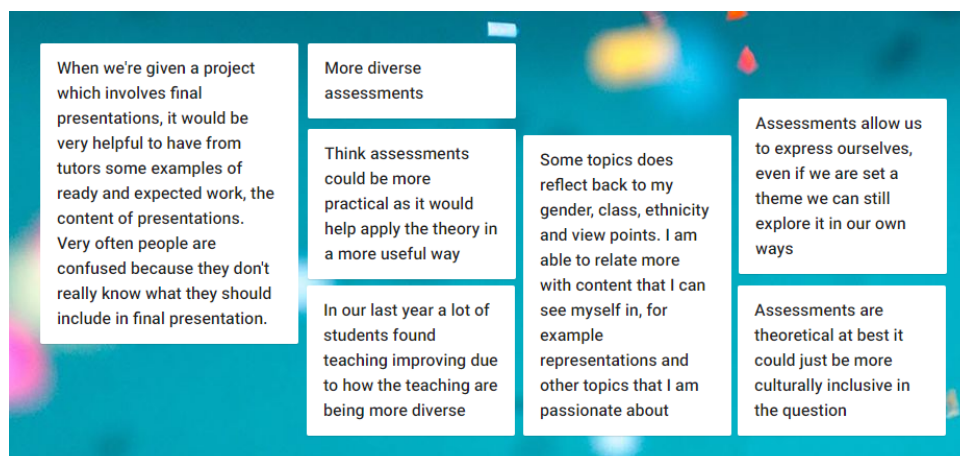
▼ Personal tutoring

In relation to personal tutoring, students spoke equally of positive experiences, negative experiences and of never meeting their personal tutor. Students who had not met with their tutor had not done so because they didn't know who they were – either not knowing where to find this information or having faced an issue which led to the identity of their tutor being changed but they weren't told who to.

When students spoke positively of their experiences of personal tutoring, they spoke of finding tutors approachable and supportive. Where fewer positive experiences were shared, these focused upon staff being unavailable, tutorials being too short and students feeling uncomfortable about talking to staff. Students also noted feeling as though some tutors could not understand their perspective or their experience and therefore were likely to seek out other support.

2.2 Teaching and Learning

During the sessions three key themes arose within the Teaching and Learning strand: Cultural Inclusivity (73% of sessions), Feedback (64% of sessions) and Assessment (59% of sessions).



▼ Feedback

Students' largely questioned the quality of the feedback they received. Specific issues included: vague and confusing feedback; a lack of specificity in how to improve; having to meet with lecturers to be able to understand feedback; difficulty in gaining access to feedback and a general lack of feedback. Students also noted that when they achieved well, they were often not provided with feedback on how to continue to develop.

Where students spoke positively of the feedback, they received they highlighted a variety in the methods used to provide feedback (for example, audio feedback); feedback which considered the next assignment and access to staff to discuss feedback as some of the elements which resulted in their positive experience.

▼ Assessment

Students raised several concerns regarding their assessments. These included: lack of clarity around requirements of assessment; not being able to bring their own experiences into their work; and a lack of opportunity to practically apply knowledge during assessment (where appropriate). Students suggested that examples of successful assessments would help to clarify expectations.

Where students spoke of the benefits of assessments, this was exclusively in relation to diverse assessment methods. Students valued a range of opportunities to demonstrate their learning. Students also highlighted assessments that allowed them to reflect on their own background and were critical of those that did not.

▼ Cultural Inclusivity

Within this theme, students spoke primarily of the cultural inclusivity of their curriculum content. They referred to how their courses included worldwide perspectives, highlighted cultural awareness and utilised knowledge from a variety of perspectives. Students also spoke of representation, in relation to their own ability to relate to curriculum content and where lecturers reflected on their own cultural backgrounds as part of their teaching.

Students recognised where programmes had taken a more diverse approach to teaching and learning (compared to previous years' study). Only a handful of students noted a lack of cultural inclusivity in their curricula.

2.3 Development

During the sessions three key themes arose within the Development strand: Placements (77% of sessions), Library (73% of sessions), and Careers & Employability (68% of sessions).



▼ Placements

Students spoke equally of frustrations surrounding a lack of access to placement opportunities and a lack of adequate support around how to gain a placement. In both cases, it was felt that the guidance and support received was too generic and therefore did not support them in securing a placement related to their specific career path. Or, where students were encouraged to engage with a placement there were then not enough to go around. Interestingly, where students spoke positively of the support, they received these comments were all from BAL programmes.

Some students also noted barriers to engaging with placements, such as the duration of placements or the needs to juggle placements with other responsibilities such as additional paid work and care work.

▼ Library

Students valued having 24hr access to the library and commended the library team for their support and willingness to help. Students felt at home in the library. It is perhaps this popularity that also lead to students struggling to access study spaces, computers and resources such as CLASS tutorials. This difficulty in access was the most commonly raised topic within the library theme. Students also spoke of needing greater signposting to the resources and support services available within the library. Finally, noise levels in the library were noted as a problem and this led to some students feeling uncomfortable about working in the library.

▼ Careers & Employability

The main concern of conversations surrounding careers and employability was that of needing more guidance. Students were particularly interested in how to prepare for entering job market after graduation and understanding the careers open to them through their specific degree. Students spoke of struggling to access support for roles that were not considered the common route from their degree and therefore requested greater consideration of this.

2.4 Community

During the sessions three key themes arose within the Community strand: Societies (68% of sessions) and Space (64% of sessions).



▼ Societies

Students had mixed perspectives on society engagement. Some students struggled to find the time to join a society or did not feel comfortable attempting to join one alone. Students also perceived a heavy focus on social events, and this was especially concerning to students where discounts on society equipment (such as sports kits) were only offered to those who engaged with socials. Students noted that society funds would be better allocated to supporting students to engage with the societies.

Students did acknowledge, however, that society engagement improved their range of relationships on campus and increased their sense of belonging. Others appreciated the opportunity to engage with others around their hobby and to develop as an individual alongside their academic development. Students suggested that more programme societies may support greater programme-level integration.

▼ Space

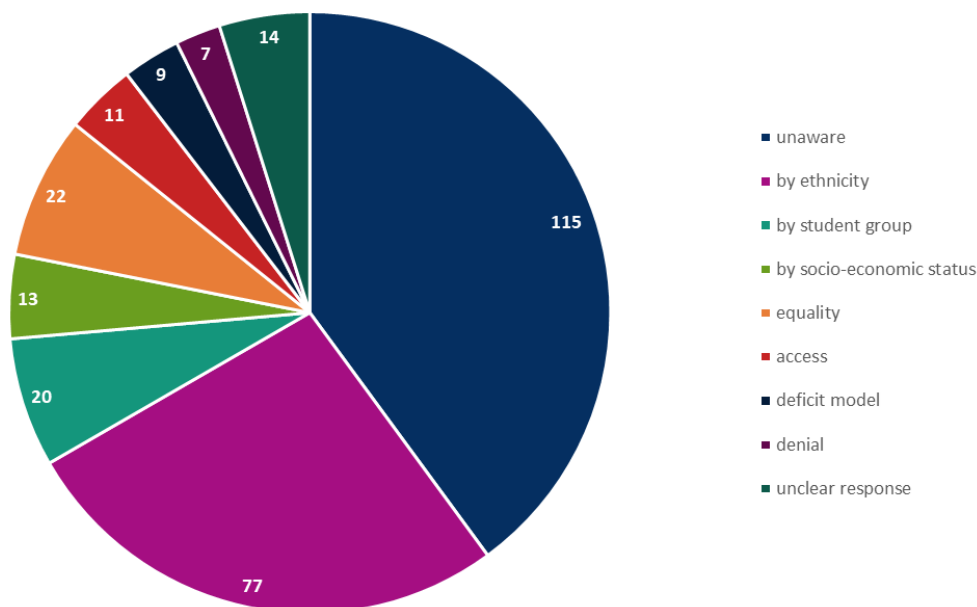
Students were largely positive about their experiences of campus space. They spoke of welcoming spaces and places where they felt comfortable. They valued having everything they needed on campus and within their faculty buildings and having plenty of social space, such as the new food court. The recent developments to campus were viewed highly and seen as having increased their sense of belonging, with recognition that imagery on campus was more diverse. Collaborative spaces, primarily with design programmes, were seen to support students in developing their work and engaging with their peers.

Where students were less positive about campus space was in relation to places to study. Not all buildings have designated study space and students found it distracting to move to other buildings in between lectures. Some felt the focus was too heavily on social space over study space.

3. Student Voice Survey

A student voice survey was implemented to ascertain student awareness of the attainment gap and their awareness of and engagement with Freedom to Achieve. Of the 288 students who completed the survey, 115 (40 per cent) were unaware of what the attainment gap is. Of those remaining, 77 students (27 per cent) were aware that the issue related to a difference in attainment between students of different ethnicities. A further 20 students (7 per cent) understood that the attainment gap referred to a difference in attainment between student groups and 13 students (5 per cent) linked the attainment gap to socio-economic status. These groups were not aware that this was related to student ethnicity specifically. Twenty-two students (8 per cent) linked the attainment gap to equality and diversity more broadly, but were not clear on the specific link to a difference in attainment. Finally, a total of 16 students (5 per cent) demonstrated deficit model thinking or a reluctance to acknowledge that the issue exists. The graph below illustrates this range of views.

What is your understanding of the attainment gap?



In comparison to the previous year's survey, student lack of awareness reduced by 6%. Links to difference by student ethnicity did not change however, remaining at 27% in both years, and the gains made by this decrease were instead found under Equality and difference by socio-economic

status. Therefore, we can deduce that whilst there has been a slight shift in student awareness of the attainment gap, it is in a broad sense and not related specifically to the issue of race and higher education.

When asked if they had been informed about the attainment gap during their studies, the majority had not (59 per cent). Of those that had been informed, this was primarily through lectures (20 per cent) and via the Student Union (9 per cent). When students were asked if they had heard of the Freedom to Achieve project, 184 of the 288 students were unaware (67 per cent). Again, those that had heard of the project had done so through lectures (15 per cent) and the Students' Union (12 per cent).

The 2018 survey found that none of the students participating had engaged directly with the project. In the 2019 survey, however, a total of 20 students had been involved in project activity. This was largely in the form of participating in programme-level co-creation events. Of those who had not engaged with the project, 76% cited a lack of awareness of project activity as the main reason for this.

'The one module I think actually did well in terms of offering a range of assessments and adapting teaching styles was Power, Politics and Morality ... Offering students the opportunity to use presentations or essays because everyone learns differently! Limiting students to academic traditional essay writing is a problem due to the Eurocentric academic style of writing and the heavily Eurocentric content that obviously BME students cannot relate to. Ethnic minorities are too often left out of History, if you are going to make it compulsory for me to have to learn about the middle-aged white philosophers (some racist... but clearly that bit is left out) then you can make it compulsory to push the contributions of Black and Asian thinkers. We shouldn't just be optional so that universities feel that they are being diverse and adhering to a tick box scheme.'

- Student Voice Survey (S90)

4. Key Lessons

The student voice strand of the project has resulted in a number of findings which will support the development of the next stage of our work as an institution. The crucial points to highlight from this work are:

The importance of communication

The student voice survey identified that students were not informed about the attainment gap, or the Freedom to Achieve project. Where students had heard of these, it was primarily through lecturers and the student's union, not from the project team directly. As the project seeks to expand beyond the 40 pilot programmes in the next phase of work, effective communication with the student body will be key.

Broadening the project focus

The primary focus of Freedom to Achieve was supporting staff to review and enhance their curricula to ensure that students of colour are able to relate to the content. The student voice strand, however, identified that there are factors beyond the curriculum which impact attainment for these students. In particular students noted the importance of relationships with staff and other students and their greater sense of belonging on campus. These findings suggest that future work should move to developing a much broader, institution wide approach to improving the student experience for students of colour.