SHEFFIELD HALLAM UNIVERSITY

Student Support Framework

1   Introduction
The purpose of the Student Support Framework is to articulate:
- the University's commitment to providing a "supportive student experience"[1] as a key feature of our 'offer' to students
- the rationale for developing a managed approach to student support and the expected benefits of this
- the key principles which will underpin all of the University's student support activities and which will enable continuous development, innovation and sharing of good practice
- the strength of the current model of student support, viewed in the context of these principles

2   Scope
This Framework encompasses the whole student lifecycle and recognises the diversity of our student body. It covers all aspects of the student experience outside the direct teaching environment and involves every part of the organisation. It is therefore of relevance to all staff, both in Faculties and Directorates, who contribute to managing or delivering student support.

In order to provide some clarity regarding the scope of the Student Support Framework existing student support activities have been mapped across five 'domains' (Appendix One). Whilst the domains are not mutually exclusive they represent themed sets of relationships and activities which define the student experience. The themes illustrate <u>what</u> is being delivered not how it is delivered or the roles responsible for delivery. The domain map has been developed with a staff audience in mind but may be adapted for student use as part of the development of a student communications plan (see section 6 below).

3   The Rationale for a Student Support Framework
The reasons why it is important to have a managed approach to student support are set out below. One of the keys to the success of this framework will be staff having a shared understanding of these drivers.

3.1   *Organisational values*
The character of the University is built on our commitment to friendliness, supportiveness and personal attention. This is reflected in a number of key documents, most notably:
- The University's Refreshed Corporate Plan (2011 - 2013) and associated enabling strategies
- The University's Access Agreement

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[1] Corporate Plan 2011-2013 https://staff.shu.ac.uk/corporateplan/

- The University's Student Charter (2011-2012)

The Corporate Plan explores the distinctive features of Sheffield Hallam which includes an excellent reputation for the quality of our teaching and pride in the provision of a very supportive student experience. This feature is also expressed in the University's brand values of forward thinking, supportiveness, and employability, with the University aiming to "provide our students with exceptional care and support to help them settle into university life so that they are better able to succeed in their studies, build relationships and develop their independence as individuals". One of the key *objectives in the Plan is t*o improve the quality of our student experience as measured by student satisfaction, graduate employment, student retention and progression, with the aim of moving into the top 25% of UK universities for these indicators.

The Access Agreement sets out how Sheffield Hallam intends to safeguard and promote fair access to HE. One of the five strategic aims that the University sets out in the Agreement is to "provide a supportive, challenging and inclusive learning experience which enables all learners to reach their potential and progress into employment or further study."

The Charter embodies the University's commitment to delivering a high quality student experience and is an example of the partnership between staff and students. Supportiveness is a key feature of the Charter and is reflected in a number of the University's commitments including those relating to staff behaviour, induction activities, provision of information and advice and student representation. Similar expectations are placed on students within the Charter in relation to working collegially and making a positive contribution to the creation of a supportive learning community.

In order to deliver these aims and objectives it is necessary to have a corporate framework and managed approach which enables all staff in the institution to understand the direction of travel and be clear what is expected of them.

3.2 **_Changing student demands_**
The nature of student support needs to constantly adapt to suit the current and future requirements of students. A recent report into student retention and success considered the possible consequences of increased student fees and concluded that more students may choose to continue to live in the family home rather than in university accommodation or with student peers; more students may combine part or full-time study with employment; and students may postpone entering HE and thus study as mature students. All of these factors may make it more difficult for students to fully participate, integrate and feel like they belong in HE, which might have a detrimental impact on their retention and success.[2] Meeting students changing needs is therefore going to be critical to the success of the institution.

3.3 **_Maintaining competeveness_**
The University's fee is based on delivery of a high quality teaching and learning experience for students. In the National Student Survey (2012) the University was between the second quartile and the first quartile of universities, ranking 50 out of 119 for "I have received sufficient advice and

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[2] Liz Thomas (2012) What Works? Student Retention and Success , HEFCE and Paul Hamlyn Foundation

support with my studies". When ranked against twelve teaching focussed comparator HEIs the University ranked seventh.

Students' perceptions of the support they receive may increasingly start to influence the future choices of prospective students who will have access to comparative data in the Key Information Sets (KIS).[3]   The University's performance in delivering high quality support is therefore likely to be a factor in the University's ability to remain competitive and meet its recruitment targets.

3.4   **Regulatory and legal requirements**
There are a number of regulatory and legal requirements which cover activities within the scope of the Framework most notably the UK Quality Code for Higher Education[4] and Equality Act 2010: Public Sector Equality Duty.[5]   Ensuring the University meets these requirements is critical to the organisation. The principles underpinning these regulations are currently being embedded in relevant strategic documents led by Academic Board and the Equality and Diversity Board respectively. Rather than see this as an issue of compliance it is important to recognise the aspirational nature of some of these principles and the institution's desire to be an exemplar of best practice within this field.

The framework also provides an opportunity to develop staff awareness and understanding of a number of key pieces of legislation and consider the degree to which the central principles are embedded in our approaches to the management and delivery of student support. Examples include the Data Protection Act and the Health and Safety at Work Act which underpin the way in which staff collaborate across the institution to ensure students have a safe and successful learning experience.

3.5   **Sharing best practice**
The literature relating to learner support shows that increasingly students are looking at ways of blending home, work and education and advanced technology is enabling new ways of supporting this way of life. Flexibility and seamless support is now expected by students and this has required universities to consider more holistic approaches to supporting student learning. One approach is through greater partnership and collaboration which is being extended across professional boundaries to ensure students' needs are met.[6] To maximise the benefits of such an approach it is important to have a framework within which all staff delivering student support can operate. This also enables best practice to be shared effectively across the institution.

4   **The Student Support Framework: Key Principles**
The Framework applies to all students regardless of mode or status. It is comprised of principles which will:
- ensure that all students are able to fulfil their potential,
- guide the behaviours and actions of all staff

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[3] http://unistats.direct.gov.uk/
[4] http://www.qaa.ac.uk/AssuringStandardsAndQuality/quality-code/Pages/default.aspx
[5] http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/equalities/equality-act/
[6] Margaret Weaver (ed) (2008), Transformative Learning Support Models in Higher Education, Facet Publishing, London

- guide our approach to the development and provision of student support and
- inform a strategy that details priority actions, the impact of which can be measured to evaluate the quality of our student support.

i. **Collaborative** - students are enabled to feel fully involved in the life of the University and provided with opportunities to influence both what and how support is delivered.

ii. **Belonging** - activities encourage and enable students to develop a sense of community on their course and with the University. Students' experiences and contributions are valued and celebrated.

iii. **Inclusive** - the importance of individual identity is recognised by ensuring services are inclusive and accessible, and by providing opportunities for one-to-one support.

iv. **Clear** - communication is effective, describing what support students can expect from the University, and what they are responsible for.

v. **Professional** - students are treated with respect and courtesy; services are of high quality, and developed in response to feedback and sector standards.

5   Distinctive Features of this Student Support Framework

The model of student support articulated below has a number of features which make it distinctive within the sector. At a time when HEIs are increasingly super-converging their services and moving towards the provision of 'one-stop shops', Sheffield Hallam supports an alternative approach with a focus on embedded course support with a strong emphasis on partnership and collaboration across teams. The purpose of articulating the model is to enable staff to see any development work they are involved with in the context of the overall approach and understand the direction of travel.

5.1   *Course focus*

The University has a devolved model which is based on the premise that support can be most effective when it is contextualised within a student's course experience. This recognises that interventions and approaches which are mainstreamed and inclusive are likely to improve the retention of some students and contribute to maximising the success of all students. By making sure activities are relevant to students' current academic interests and future aspirations the potential benefits of engaging with student support activities should be explicit.[7] The relationship with the University and course is initiated at an early point in the recruitment process and faculty course teams aim to maintain this through each transition point in the student's journey with the University. The provision of individual support for students is a key element of the University's offer and the role of Academic Adviser is being developed within each Faculty to support students' academic development.

5.2   *Partnership and collaboration*

A further distinctive feature of the University's approach to student support is a strong partnership between Faculty course teams and specialist services managed and delivered by Directorates. Through collaborative work it is possible to identify students who are opting out or failing to engage in

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[7] Characteristics of effective interventions, What Works? Student Retention and Success

mainstream activities and intervene at an early stage. There are a number of other benefits of collaboration including more knowledgeable staff who are able to refer across service boundaries and who benefit from sharing expertise and a more efficient use of staff resource.

The collaboration which is a feature of this model goes beyond simply referring effectively between teams. It is concerned with finding innovative ways of working together to improve the student experience and solve problems. Evidence of working in partnership can be seen throughout the University in a whole host of activities from curriculum development or process improvement to crisis resolution and staff development and training. This approach supports a holistic model of student support as described in 3.5.

In addition to the collaboration between staff across the institution Sheffield Hallam is committed to continuing to work in partnership with the Students' Union. This partnership offers significant opportunities, many of which are highlighted in the Union's Strategic Vision 2012-2015. Outcomes include finding effective ways of communicating with students, ensuring services and activities are developed which are relevant to students and developing new opportunities for students.[8]

5.3 **_High quality and professional services_**
The University is committed to providing high quality services and recognises that managing and developing our people is critical to that aspiration. The Corporate Plan states that we aim to recruit, motivate and develop outstanding, diverse people[9]. The skills, knowledge, competencies and qualifications of staff in student support roles are therefore defined in line with current nationally recognised professional qualifications[10]. The University takes pride in the quality of its staff and the expert support available to students from first point of contact.

5.4 **_Proactively supporting individuals_**
The University has a strong national reputation for recruiting students from a broad range of social backgrounds and securing high rates of progression and retention.[11] Sheffield Hallam is a multicultural institution with a vibrant and diverse student population and this richness of experience is widely celebrated within the events and activities of the University community. The Student Support Framework recognises that individual identity is important whilst "acknowledging that the social and educational backgrounds of students often determine attainment, expectations and ambitions, the University aims to support learners in a way which values diversity and enables all individuals to reach their potential and progress in their chosen careers."[12]

The University's <u>Duty of Care</u> Statement sets out the key issues for the University and its approach combined with a number of specific policies,

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[8] Fulfilling Potential, Sheffield Hallam Students' Union Strategic Vision 2012-2015
[9] Refreshed Corporate Plan 2011-13, Managing and Developing our People
[10] Matrix Quality Standard for Information, Advice and Guidance Services, Element 2.3
[11] Refreshed Corporate Plan 2011-13
[12] Access Agreement 2012/13

particularly with respect to supporting students who may be considered vulnerable.

An Equality Information Summary Report is published annually which shows the profile of the student body in relation to gender, ethnicity, disability and age. Annual equality objectives ensure that any emerging issues are addressed.

5.5   *Alignment with Graduate Attributes*
The University has developed a set of Graduate Attributes, which are the qualities, skills and understandings students should desirably develop during their time within the institution. The model of student support adopted by the institution, and the principles underpinning that model, support the development of those attributes. For example working collaboratively to develop services provides an opportunity for students to develop the skills to interact confidently with others in a range of diverse situations[13]. Similarly activities that promote belonging, or recognise and value individual identity, encourage students to become increasingly independent and self motivated and capable of critically reflecting on their own needs[14].

6   **Student Support Strategy and Implementation Plan**
The Student Support Framework will inform the development of a Student Support Strategy and Implementation Plan. This will be developed by the Head of Student Services in the Quality Enhancement and Student Success Portfolio (QESS) and the Head of Faculty Professional Services in the Faculty of ACES, working in collaboration with senior managers and representatives of the Students' Union. This work will ensure the requirements of the Quality Assurance Agency's UK Quality Code for Higher Education are met, by including priority actions in operational plans for 2013 - 14. Chapter B4 of the code, which covers student support, is due to be published in March 2013. This Framework is aligned with the 'expectation' and 'indicators of sound practice ' articulated in the draft code.

The Strategy will also ensure that the benefits of the model described above are fully realised and enable a more consistent approach across the institution.
Based upon an initial assessment of potential benefits; colleagues' feedback (in the Framework development workshops); sector good practice, and risk management, it is likely that the following will be proposed as priority areas. There is a focus on enabling activities to ensure maximum value is delivered from our existing Student Experience Programme:

- develop a student communications plan to ensure students have accurate and timely information about the activities described in the Student Support Map (Appendix 1)
- establish a professional development framework for staff providing student support[15]
- accredit student support services against an appropriate nationally recognised standard

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[13] Graduate Attribute - Communication
[14] Graduate Attribute - Motivation and Engagement
[15] Refreshed Corporate Plan - 7, p11

- prioritise the health and sustainability agenda in the student experience by aligning the Students Union Health and Sustainability Strategic Vision with an aspiration to become a Healthy University.[16]

The annual action plan will also be informed by the priorities identified through the Institutional Profile and Student Written Submission and student feedback received through the National Student Survey and other corporate surveys.

7 Governance, Management, Monitoring and Reporting

The Framework, and the subsequent Student Support Strategy, will be led by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Academic).

The Student Experience Executive Board (SEEB) will have responsibility for monitoring the development, implementation and operation of the Student Support Framework and Strategy and will receive regular reports on its progress.

The Head of Student Services in QESS, in collaboration with a designated Head of Faculty Professional Services, will have responsibility for the management of the development, implementation and operation of the strategy. They will also be responsible for development and dissemination of the strategy and its associated implementation plan.

The Student Experience Learning and Teaching Committee, and its sub-committee the Student Voice Committee, will be consulted on the development and implementation of the Strategy, to make sure that it is in line with the priorities identified by the University and its students.

8 Risks

There are a number of risks associated with the drivers described in Section 3. The University has positioned itself as an organisation which values supportiveness and the new Student Charter includes a number of statements which set out what students can expect from the University and vice versa. There would be reputational risks, as well as to the partnership, if the University failed to deliver on any of these statements. Failure to deliver a positive student experience may also impact on the number of student complaints, with some progressing to the Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA).

Secondly the University's competitive position is reliant on the University's ability to deliver high quality support and receive positive feedback from final year students. Failure to deliver a positive experience for all students may damage the University's ability to recruit to target which would carry considerable financial risks were the shortfall to be significant. There may also be significant risks of failing to meet regulatory or legal duties both in terms of the university's reputation and/or sanctions imposed.

Approved by Academic Board, February 2013 (Minute AB/13/7 refers)

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[16] http://www.healthyuniversities.ac.uk/