



Sheffield Hallam Students' Union  
Student Voice Report 2021-22

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## Introduction

This Student Voice Report marks ten years since inception at Sheffield Hallam Students' Union. Though the contents and the recommendations change yearly, the basic premise of the report has remained: a way for Students' Union staff and elected Officers to enact change that students' want to see, backed by research. The Student Voice Report is our main lobbying tool and, by collating the research, insight and student voice activity into a singular report, clear actions and recommendations can be made. The recommendations are progressed and achieved through partnership working between the Students' Union and the University.

As we move into a new era for the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), the data collected throughout this report should prove particularly useful. All primary research referenced throughout this report was conducted by the Students' Union and can be used as evidence of students' experiences in the student submission for the TEF.

Reflecting on the recommendations and achievements from Student Voice Reports over the past ten years, below are the changes which were achieved through partnership working:

- Increased availability of digital library resources, such as core textbooks and journals.
- Introduction of lecture capture to help students with revision.
- Creation of a University policy regarding the timeframe in which students should receive feedback on assessments.
- The reduction of the cost of printing on campus for students.
- Creation of the minimum contact hours policy to ensure students are responded to within good amount of time.
- Creation of the postgraduate development programme to ensure that postgraduate research students are also give tailored advice for their careers.
- A cost reduction on campus via payment with SHUcards, free hot water taps at Library Cafés, and microwave facilities across campus.
- Increased funding allocated to students that need it most through the Student Support Fund and the Student Success Scholarship.
- The establishment of electronic copies of assessment feedback.
- Creation of maps for safest walking routes between campuses.
- The recruitment of a more diverse range of counsellors and practitioners to support students in the Student Wellbeing team.
- A revamped Postgraduate Research (PGR) handbook that provides key information for new postgraduate researchers.
- A reduction in timetabled activity on Wednesday afternoons to encourage student participation in sport and extracurricular activities.
- Providing equal opening times across campus, including the library opening times (24 hours per day, 7 day per week) to allow students to access when is suitable for them.

This report is split into three sections: [Section 1: Our learning experiences](#), [Section 2: Our well-being and community](#), and [Section 3: Our collective student voice](#). The report also includes the progress and impact of the 2020/21 Student Voice Report recommendations in the appendix.

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## Methodology

This report has been written and compiled by the Students' Union, including Research, Insight & Student Voice, Representation & Advocacy and Student Campaigns & Rights teams, as well as the Advice Centre and our Elected Officers from the 2021/22 academic year. The research and data used throughout this report has been collected through our formal research activity, including quantitative and qualitative sources (as outlined in [Appendix A: Research & Data Sources](#)). Some of this research activity has been created, collected, and analysed by the Students' Union's Research, Insight & Student Voice team; other research activity has been commissioned by the Students' Union, such as our 'Hallam, How Are We Doing?' pulse survey. This report also triangulates data collected from other sources to support and validate our research; other sources of data used are referenced throughout the report.

This year, we are particularly pleased that we have been able to co-create research using participatory methods with students and Elected Officers. Our 'Lived experience barriers to academic achievement and perceptions of BAME targeted campaigns' research project was led by our BAME Ambassador, our 'Expectations Vs Reality: A Student-Centred Exploration of Feedback Pedagogy' research project was co-created with Elected Officers from start to finish, and our Student Researcher was involved in the analysis of many of the research projects referenced throughout this report. Furthermore, the report itself, as mentioned above, has been written and compiled jointly with teams across the Students' Union.

Three of our main research projects went through formal university ethical approval. Two qualitative projects: '*Reconceptualising Transition into Higher Education: Pandemic Belonging in the University*' (Converis ID ER36585392) and '*Expectations vs Reality: A student centred exploration of feedback pedagogy*' (Converis ID ER38822376). Our mixed-methods research project '*Lived experiences: barriers to academic achievement and perceptions of BAME targeted campaigns*' (Converis ID ER41647682), led by our BAME Ambassadors, also went through ethical approval.

## Executive Summary

The 2021/22 academic year was a transition for many from pandemic-era shifts, which increased or was wholly reliant on digital learning, towards a student experience that is more traditional, with on-campus teaching and events. This report focusses on students' transitions, looking specifically at first-year students, but also how students have coped with the transition back to normality.

The first section, which focussed on students' course experiences, features research from our 'Hallam, How Are We Doing?' pulse survey, alongside qualitative research on student transitions, assessment feedback practices, and curriculum and BAME students' experiences. The second section, on community and student well-being, includes findings from our pulse survey, as well as international students' housing, student transitions, and belonging. The third and final section looks critically at student representation and voice, reflecting on the review of the Department Rep system and National Student Survey results. As a Students' Union, this also allows us to reflect on our own work as we continue to move towards goals in our 2025 Strategic Plan.

Whilst this academic year has been filled with positive changes – more on-campus learning and student experiences which have been missed in the two previous academic years – there have been others for whom this year was not quite what they expected. Our student nurses are struggling to fulfil the required number of placement hours for their course, final-year students felt that the pandemic had a significant negative impact on their personal well-being and general university experience, some international students struggled to find suitable accommodation, especially if they

had families, and, despite our, the Union and the University's, best efforts, student engagement continued to be low. Gathering student feedback was difficult for some of our student representatives; students were also bombarded with requests to join in, take part, or provide their views to too many competing organisations. This report, based on the Students' Union's research carried out during the 2021-2022 academic year, provides recommendations which the University can work to improve as we move into 2023 and beyond.

Throughout this report, we refer to our Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic students in the collective, as 'BAME'. We recognise that this is not ideal terminology. In the higher education sector, the use of the term 'BAME' is mixed: when referring to the degree awarding gap, it is helpful to indicate that White British students are awarded higher grades than all other ethnic groups. This, however, does mask differences between ethnic minority groups in their respective awarding gaps and those of white students. As part of our '*Lived experience barriers to academic achievement and perceptions of BAME targeted campaigns*' research projects, BAME participants were asked to share their thoughts on this terminology. The details of this are within [Section 1: Our learning experiences](#).

## List of recommendations

Below is the list of recommendations made throughout this report.

Section	No.	Recommendation	SHU	SHSU
1: Our learning experiences	1	The University to provide more on-campus learning throughout the 2022/23 academic year, whilst also keeping useful aspects of online learning in place.	●	
	2	The Students' Union to continue to monitor students' opinions of transition throughout their undergraduate course.		●
	3	The University to provide further support for students on how to interpret and utilise their feedback to benefit students' academic progression.	●	
	4	The College of Business, Technology, & Engineering to clearly communicate to students their specific exam arrangements.	●	
	5	The College of Health, Wellbeing & Life Sciences to provide regular and consistent communication for Health & Social Care students which should include the following: placement allocation, changes to timetabling, keeping students updated, and general student support.	●	
	6	The College of Social Sciences & Arts to standardise communication with students to ensure that key messages are being heard.	●	
	7	The University to continually update students on projects designed to eliminate the BAME awarding gap to ensure that students made aware and held accountable.	●	
	8	The University and the Students' Union to continue the progress of decolonising and diversifying reading lists.	●	●
	9	The University to increase international student awareness of study skills and support sessions available pre-arrival/on arrival to enable understanding and progression through their course.	●	

Section	No.	Recommendation	SHU	SHSU
2: Our well-being and community		The University to increase awareness of student well-being service and resources available through co-produced slides on display pre/post lectures.	●	
	11	The Students' Union continue to monitor student need regarding menstrual product accessibility to ensure an inclusive learning experience for all students.		●
	12	The University to review student community and provide tailored events and activities for each level of study, recognising the nuanced differences between academic levels.	●	
	13	The Students' Union to review Collegiate Campus presence to increase student activity and engagement.		●
	14	The University and the Students' Union to provide more information for international students with families about the considerations involved in finding somewhere to live - and ensure this is better publicised to them before they and their families leave their home country. The University to work to increase the number of partners within the Snug scheme who can provide family accommodation.	●	●
	15	The Students' Union to review the lack of participation in societies, clubs, and sport amongst UK-domiciled BAME students.		●
3: Our collective student voice	16	The Students' Union and the University communicate and promote the Department Rep roles, including their remit and their positionality in the representation system, with academic staff of all levels.	●	●
	17	The University to work with the Students' Union to better promote the Union's services and offers to ensure all staff and students are aware of how and why getting involved with the Students' Union is important.	●	●

## Impact

Following last year's Student Voice Report, recommendations were made based on the collation and analysis of student feedback, formal research, and external data sources. The Students' Union, in partnership with the University, has worked hard to ensure that these issues have been addressed to improve the university experience for students. Below are some of the most significant changes that occurred based on recommendations from 2020/21 Student Voice Report recommendations. To read the full responses for each recommendations, please see Appendix B.

- The University and the Students' Union entered into a new data sharing agreement; this allows the Students' Union to enhance service delivery and research on students' experiences.
- The University have created a Student Voice Repository and Bulletin which is shared with university staff monthly in the Academic Digest. This bulletin highlights insight from across the University and the Students' Union in one, easily understandable report.
- The College of Business, Technology, & Engineering provided more assessment support for students, specifically in the Department of Engineering & Maths.
- The College of Health, Wellbeing, & Life Sciences provided drop-in placement support sessions for students and have given students on sport courses the option of undertaking a sandwich placement.
- The College of Social Sciences & Arts have increased the allocation of equipment and resources so that students can access off campus.
- Academic Advisers are required to share well-being and motivation information for students to ensure that they are provided a holistic experience.
- The University has increased hardship funding for the upcoming academic year (2022/23) by 66 percent.



## Section 1: Our learning experiences

As organisations, universities, and individuals start to transition through the Coronavirus pandemic, the ways in which students are engaging with their studies, their campus spaces, and their Students' Unions, is changing. Whilst the attitude towards higher education as a market was part of the discourse prior to the pandemic, the transactional nature of education has continued to pervade. Numerous articles<sup>1</sup> and books<sup>2</sup> have indicated that higher education institutions in England, and the students that attend them, treat education as they would any other service which they consume. As students continue to transition through the changing landscape of higher education in the wake of a global pandemic, their attitudes towards services and offers are likely to be different than pre-pandemic.

Our 'Hallam, How Are We Doing?' survey is a 3-part pulse survey used to gather and track student opinions on their satisfaction with their education, as well as the Students' Union. The first wave of this pulse survey took place in November 2021 and, at that time, 74% of students who completed the survey were satisfied with their education. In addition, first-year students were asked to rate their university experience so far and 74% of those respondents rated their experience as 'excellent' or 'good'. Where first-year students commented negatively about their experience, these comments were about the teaching methods used, the organisation of their course, or their learning community.<sup>3</sup> As research has identified, course organisation is strongly correlated to students' overall satisfaction with their course.<sup>4</sup> Across all three themes, however, was the impact that virtual learning continues to have on students' experiences. Whilst these students are generally comfortable with virtual methods, when their experience does not match the reality of their course, students did not rate their experience highly. If the teaching methods have not adapted for their online environment, or the organisation of their timetable means that online lectures and seminars occur back-to-back, or they are unable to make friends with their course mates as they expected, this results in a negative experience. It is not the combination of all three that results in a negative experience. For some students, it might be that friendships have not blossomed as they expected, thus feeling negative about their experience.

### 1.1 Learning environments

According to the Office for National Statistics<sup>5</sup>, students lost approximately 6-months of education due to a lack of 'pre-university' support and mass cancellations of exams. Such abrupt change raises a variety of questions around student transitions into university. As part of this, we conducted a qualitative research project exploring twelve students' journeys during their first year of study. When participants were asked whether learning virtually was helpful, responses were conflicting. Some participants discussed the convenience and efficiency of online learning (i.e., being able to access lectures and resources from home) which was especially useful considering the rising cost in

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<sup>1</sup> WonkHE (26 January 2022). "They are consumers at the end of the day. Or are they?" Accessed on 12 April 2022 via <https://wonkhe.com/blogs-sus/they-are-consumers-at-the-end-of-the-day-or-are-they/>.

<sup>2</sup> McCaig, C. (2018). *The Marketisation of English Higher Education: A Policy Analysis of a Risk Based System*. (1st ed.) Emerald Publishing Limited. doi:9781787438576.

<sup>3</sup> SHSU (December 2021). "SHSU Monthly Student Feedback Report". Accessed on 12 April 2022 via <https://www.hallamstudentsunion.com/pageassets/representation/research/SHSU-Monthly-Student-Feedback-Report-December-2021.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> Burgess, Senior, & Moores (2018). A 10-year case study on the changing determinants of university student satisfaction in the UK. *PLOS ONE* 13(2): e0192976. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0192976>.

<sup>5</sup> Pownall, Harris, R., & Blundell-Birtill, P. (2022). Supporting students during the transition to university in COVID-19: Five key considerations and recommendations for educators. *Psychology Learning & Teaching*, 21(1), 3–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14757257211032486>.

commuting and feeling comfortable to learn in their own environment. This was particularly significant considering the high proportion of students at Sheffield Hallam that are commuters.<sup>6</sup> These same students also shared that they appreciated the ability to pause and rewind recorded lectures, both seen as a positive device for their learning. Conversely, other students spoke of their discontent towards aspects of online learning.

*“it's like the difference between going to the cinema and watching a film at home”*

As participants shared, pre-recorded lectures led to ambiguity over their learning. Though students are provided with the lecture slides, the opportunity to freely ask questions is a key component of critical thinking and active learning. This is a skillset that develops during a student's learning in Higher Education.<sup>7</sup> In addition, some participants shared the impact that virtual learning has on motivation to engage with their education:

*“I feel like because I'm at home and I'm either lying on my bed or I'm on my desk and not interacting with my classmates I'm not really engaging with the lessons and it's harder to have a group discussion with them because, I don't know.”*

As Giesbers et. al<sup>8</sup> conclude, online learning requires more self-determination and motivation to access course materials than face-to-face learning, creating a unique divide between extrinsic and intrinsic learners. The learning environment plays a fundamental role in students' engagement with their course, their experience, and their successful transition. Teaching, learning, and assessment in our current climate relies on authentic exchanges between student, peers, and tutors. Virtual learning does have the potential to do this, but aspects of virtual education has left students feeling disconnected from their studies and subsequently a negative impact on their transitional journeys into HE.<sup>9</sup>

**Recommendation 1: The University to provide more on-campus learning throughout the 2022/23 academic year, whilst also keeping useful aspects of online learning in place.**

Our 'Hallam, How Are We Doing?' survey found that final-year undergraduate students were the least satisfied with their university experience (66% agreed) and were the most likely to indicate that they had considered dropping out of university (38% agreed). For the majority of these students, their entire higher education degree was impacted by the pandemic. Considering the students-as-consumers attitude, their degree and their educational experience has not been what was promoted to them (or indeed what has been sold to them all for most of their life).<sup>10</sup> Whilst teaching did occur, their individual learning may have been impacted by their lack of study space or their inability to

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<sup>6</sup> Sheffield Hallam University (2020). Access and participation plan 2020-21 to 2024-25. Accessed on 31 May 2022 via [file:///C:/Users/slsec4/Downloads/SheffieldHallamUniversity\\_APP\\_2020-21\\_V1\\_10005790\\_September\\_2020\\_update.pdf](file:///C:/Users/slsec4/Downloads/SheffieldHallamUniversity_APP_2020-21_V1_10005790_September_2020_update.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Davies, & Barnett, R. (2015). *The Palgrave handbook of critical thinking in higher education*. Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>8</sup> Giesbers, Rienties, B., Tempelaar, D., & Gijssels, W. (2014). *A dynamic analysis of the interplay between asynchronous and synchronous communication in online learning: The impact of motivation*. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 30(1), 30–50.

<sup>9</sup> Blankenberger, & Williams, A. M. (2020). *COVID and the impact on higher education: The essential role of integrity and accountability*. *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, 42(3), 404–423.

<sup>10</sup> WonkHE (22 July 2020). *Covid-19, consumer protection law, and universities*. Accessed on 12 April 2022 via <https://wonkhe.com/covid-19-consumer-protection-law-and-universities>.

learn with others. As was discussed in the 2020/21 Student Voice Report<sup>11</sup>, a lack of access to resources did impact on students' abilities to learn as was evidenced by comments from art, design, media, nursing, and health students.

Through our 'Hallam, How Are We Doing?' survey, we continued to monitor student satisfaction with their course and, in March 2022 (wave 2 of the three-part pulse survey), found that 65 percent of final-year undergraduate respondents were satisfied with their university experience. Whilst only a one percent decline from November 2021 survey, this could indicate just how important the whole of a students' time is – from their first induction through to their final months as a student. In addition, of these same respondents, 68 percent indicated that their university experience has been impaired by the pandemic and had a significant negative impact on their personal well-being. This was the second highest factor which final-year undergraduates stated negatively impacted their personal well-being, just behind stress and anxiety. As is discussed by our Health, Wellbeing & Life Sciences College Officer below, this was particularly the case for Nursing & Midwifery students.

**Recommendation 2: The Students' Union to continue to monitor students' opinions of transition throughout their undergraduate course.**

1.2 The feedback that supports learning

The support and the communication received from the university – in the form of support services available for all students and from their course tutors – also impacted students. When things were confusing or went awry, students' abilities to get in contact with someone that they felt accurately answered their questions was a factor in satisfaction. Considering, again, the comments from first-year undergraduate students in November 2021 (wave 1) of our 'Hallam, How Are We Doing?' survey, 111 comments were about academic support or student support services; the negative comments were specifically about the lack of care or reply that respondents had from their tutors.

The relationship between student and tutor is crucial. The support received from academic staff, and the feedback received on academic work, can significantly help to improve student outcomes and satisfaction. The way in which academic feedback is written and distributed to students is well-researched and discussed across higher education.<sup>12</sup> After all, teaching, learning, and assessment are fundamental indicators when measuring student satisfaction. The necessity for effective and student-centred feedback has grown more important in recent years due to learning environments moving online at a fast pace. Face-to-face dialogue is limited, increasing the likelihood of didactic and instructional pedagogies.<sup>13</sup> Considering the ways in which Sheffield Hallam can respond, we conducted a qualitative research project with our Officers for each college (more details for each College are below).

Tutor agency within feedback has a consequential effect upon the way students use and apply feedback. Effective feedback challenges students to achieve their best work, whilst simultaneously providing opportunities to explore learning in depth. Indeed, as Austen & Malone<sup>14</sup> assert, students

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<sup>11</sup> Sheffield Hallam Students' Union (2021). Student Voice Report 2020/21. Accessed on 25 May 2022 via [https://www.hallamstudentsunion.com/pageassets/representation/research/svr/Student\\_Voice\\_Report\\_2021\\_Final\\_Digital.pdf](https://www.hallamstudentsunion.com/pageassets/representation/research/svr/Student_Voice_Report_2021_Final_Digital.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Winstone & Carless (2020). *Designing effective feedback processes in higher education: a learning-focused approach*. Routledge.

<sup>13</sup> Saunders, & Gale, A. W. (2012). *Digital or didactic: Using learning technology to confront the challenge of large cohort teaching*. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 43(6), 847–858.

<sup>14</sup> Austen. L and Malone. C (2018). What students' want in written feedback: praise, clarity and precise individual commentary. *Practitioner Research in Higher Education*, 11 (1), 47-58.

who receive forward orientated comments on their work are more likely to engage with the comments and apply feedback to future assignments. Students want to see feedback that provides more than the overall grade. The feedback loop is an ongoing process which encourages learning and is not just for their time at university, but for life after higher education. Effective and high-quality academic feedback enables students to be independent, self-regulating learners, more able to judge the quality of their own work and actions.

Considering the collective findings from our research on assessment feedback practices, students across colleges generally agreed that individual, personalised feedback was best for improving future marks. Participants mentioned comments from academic staff that are constructive and supportive provided them opportunities to learn and grow. Details from this research project for each College are below.

**Recommendation 3: The University to provide further support for students on how to interpret and utilise their feedback to benefit students' academic progression.**

1.2.1 College of Business, Engineering & Technology

Our 'Hallam, How Are We Doing?' survey found that 73 percent of respondents from the College of Business, Technology & Engineering (BTE) agreed that they are satisfied with the academic feedback received on assessments. In a qualitative project looking at methods of feedback for students, BTE participants shared that constructive feedback was their preferred method through openly discussing their work, one-to-one, with their tutor in both a formative and summative manner. Participants stated that this promotes dialogue between both the students and tutors and gives students the opportunity to have a critical opinion about their assessment task. Participants from BTE also shared other useful forms of feedback, such as clear and coherent assessment rubrics, which helps them to reflect on what area they need to improve, or feed forward, which helps learning for future assignments and in the workplace.

*"[assessment rubrics] are really helpful in terms of future assignments"*

There were, however, some feedback devices which participants felt were not as useful. Participants shared that when tutors provide an overall grade with general comments at the bottom of their assignments, this feels basic or too impersonal, which does not help development for future assignments.

*"all you really get from [general comments] is how well you've done in that assignment"*

Furthermore, our 'Hallam, How Are We Doing?' survey found a small drop in overall student satisfaction with their university experience for respondents in College of BTE. In November 2021 (wave 1), 77 percent of respondents were satisfied and, in March 2022 (wave 2), when all other measures increased, satisfaction with the overall university experience dropped to 74 percent for BTE. Though it is unclear the exact reasons respondents replied in this way, there were some College wide issues identified by our Departments Reps that might have contributed to this.

This year, the Students' Union has worked closely with the university to raise student engagement with several services, including responding and providing feedback (through the representation system or the National Student Survey) and participation in extracurricular activities such as academic societies. College Officers work with their Department Reps to identify trends in student feedback across their college. One of the concerns identified within the College of BTE was assessment submissions. In the first semester, our Department Reps identified an issue with assessments due to miscommunication of timings for submission. Although this resulted in a review

and investigation which found that students who were impacted did not fail, this still had a negative impact on students' experiences at that specific time. Whilst this issue was resolved, clarity on exam arrangements going forward would help to mitigate future concerns or problems that might arise within this College.

**Recommendation 4: The College of Business, Technology, & Engineering to clearly communicate to students their specific exam arrangements.**

1.2.2 College of Health, Wellbeing & Life Sciences

Our research with students in the College of Health, Wellbeing & Life Sciences (HWLS) on assessment feedback practices found that students like tutors to embed comments within their assessment, as this gave specific feed forward comments that were supportive as well as critical. Whole cohort feedback was also suggested to be highly effective to support students' formative assessments prior to submission and thus feeding forward. This was recommended to reduce repeated whole cohort errors:

*"no one is making the same mistakes and shows an example through themes that have been picked up of what has gone well and not so well during writing the assignment."*

Some participants spoke about their uncertainty of how they can best use feedback to improve their future work, thus implying students had poor feedback literacy. They reported often feeling 'unsure' about how they can 'get the most out of the feedback'. Peer-to-peer feedback was suggested to bear little benefit to their academic proficiency due to the value that students hold on the knowledge and experience of their academic tutors. Students often valued their own reviews less and thus often did not believe that their work was successful. Some students, however, spoke of confidence regarding the context of the assignment. This is particularly significant as students report low self-efficacy whilst writing the assignment, but participants suggested this improved their experience of the course. This student compares the value they have about peer-to-peer feedback device to student-tutor and concludes that:

*"I value my own review less because I don't know what I am talking about, in regard to content I'm good at that but when it comes to the assignment, I couldn't tell you how it has gone."*

Additional negative feelings were amplified when students were provided with just the grade of the assignment. Some students stated how they felt unsure how they achieved the mark or grade that they did, and suggested they would struggle to replicate this for future assignment due to lack of comments on students work.

*"rather than just saying you have just met this target but don't state how you have done this which is generally really helpful to have the paragraph that expands on this"*

Furthermore, in the College of HWLS, the most frequent student concerns based on feedback from Department Reps were: feeling of isolation or lack of community; student engagement during virtual sessions; students' fees and value for money; support and communication; and timetabling. As Department Reps identified, a lack of face-to-face contact led some students to feel isolated. Some students felt unhappy with their seminars and lectures being on campus and this ongoing divide between online and in-person teaching has continued throughout the year. This lack of connection was emphasised by low engagement throughout the department. Students felt that a lack of expectations set by tutors, for example turning on cameras during virtual sessions due to the reduced-on campus experience meant that students were not acquainted with their peers to feel

comfortable enough to turn their cameras on. This extended to exams and a reduced feeling of importance which led to high levels of academic misconduct.

Students were concerned about the lack of practical days and face-to-face teaching; this occurred in the Departments of Allied Health and Nursing & Midwifery. Some were worried about their timetabled days not being sufficient for the price of their degree and that the quality of recorded lectures was not high quality, meaning that students were missing material that might be beneficial for asynchronous learning. This was particularly the case for Nursing & Midwifery students; over 100 of them provided personal accounts of the impact that the pandemic had on their learning. These comments were collected through 'Union Voice', a new Students' Union digital platform for collecting students' academic feedback. Whilst the issues that Sheffield Hallam nursing students are facing have been felt across the sector for some time now<sup>15</sup>, students mentioned concerns specific to Sheffield Hallam. Notably, 72 students commented on poor communication from the university about their placement allocation (this includes comments about poorly timed emails, placements not having correct information for students, and/or little-to-no contact from lecturers or tutors regarding placement concerns). Furthermore, 27 students mentioned the lack of support with placements; comments referred to academic advisers, course tutors, and placement staff but not receiving the help they needed. As placement spaces and the overreliance on simulated hours is felt nation-wide, supporting our student nurses to ensure that they are well-trained, prepared, and ready to graduate is and should be a high priority, especially for a university that aims to be the leading applied university in the UK.

Lastly, students in the College of HWLS felt that lecturers did not respond quickly enough to emails or other correspondence; these students felt that they were not kept up to date with the latest information or reasons as to why a decision was made. In addition, some students felt that frequent and specific timetabling changes created issues, such as communication of cancellations, poor timing of rescheduled teaching, and a challenging learning experience generally.

**Recommendation 5: The College of Health, Wellbeing & Life Sciences to provide regular and consistent communication for Health & Social Care students which should include the following: placement allocation, changes to timetabling, keeping students updated, and general student support.**

### 1.2.3 College of Social Sciences & Arts

Our 'Hallam, How Are We Doing?' survey found that student satisfaction with academic feedback rose by 4 percent between November 2021 (wave 1) and March 2022 (wave 2) for the College of Social Sciences & Arts (SSA). During this period, we conducted a qualitative research project with students reviewing effective assessment feedback practices. Within the College of SSA, students seemed more inclined toward personalised feedback or a face-to-face conversation with their tutors after receiving their summative feedback. Participants from SSA, generally, felt that generic feedback was not especially useful, but alongside a mark provided an indicator of overall performance compared to their cohort.

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<sup>15</sup> Ford, M. (5 November 2020) *Universities in 'chaotic' search for nurse clinical placements*. Accessed on 22 April 2022 via <https://www.nursingtimes.net/news/education/exclusive-universities-in-chaotic-search-for-nurse-clinical-placements-05-11-2020/>.

*“Sometimes in conversations with fellow students I find my feedback is identical to theirs. It can be too nonspecific and far too broad. So, I don’t always act on feedback for my next assignment because it’s not relevant.”*

There was a 3 percent decrease in student satisfaction for the College of SSA with their overall university experience (76% agreed in November 2021 compared to 73% in March 2022) from our ‘Hallam, How Are We Doing?’ survey. Feedback from our Department Reps in the College of SSA might indicate reasons for this: timetabling issues, particularly throughout Semester 1; student concerns with online learning; and lack of student attendance, engagement, and community. Three of the 7 Department Reps in the College of SSA mentioned the negative impact that UCU strike action had on their course. Though some Department Reps shared that the strike action was not a massive issue across their Department, some felt the effect more than others.

*“Some [students] also complained about how some tutors went on strike and others did not and how this made them feel unfairly disadvantaged. As some students received learning whereas others did not.”*

Furthermore, from our ‘Hallam, How Are We Doing?’ survey, we found a small decrease in the percentages of respondents that agree the university cares about their wellbeing (67% agreed in November 2021 compared to 62% in March 2022) in the College of SSA. As is discussed in Section 2 and as mentioned by Department Reps in the college, student community and engagement were both a concern this year. This academic year has been one of learning for both students and staff, as we were all trying to navigate life through a post-pandemic world. The methods by which students were communicated with was a concern for some students as mentioned by various Department Reps. Across SSA, students complained about the number of places where key messages are shared: Blackboard, email, text messages, or in-person. As the academic year continued, this became difficult for students navigate which messages were the critical to be aware of and which were not necessary at that time. We recognise that there cannot be a homogenous approach – what messages might be important for one student might not be important for another depending on their course, interests, or extracurricular activities. Despite this, providing a consistent way for students to receive key communication would help to mitigate concerns raised.

**Recommendation 6: The College of Social Sciences & Arts to standardise communication with students to ensure that key messages are being heard.**

1.3 Inclusive environments for our learning

Sheffield Hallam University’s strategic goal is to transform lives by shaping students’ futures. As the university states, they “...will be inclusive, supporting students from a wide range of backgrounds and giving all students the best opportunity to succeed...”<sup>16</sup> Recently, the university has also been awarded the Higher Education Institution of the Year at the NEON (National Education Opportunities Network) Awards.<sup>17</sup> Sheffield Hallam has also been mentioned by John Blake, Office for Students’ Director for Fair Access & Outcomes, for the work of South Yorkshire Futures in schools to improve

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<sup>16</sup> Sheffield Hallam University (2022). *Transforming Lives*. Accessed on 27 May 2022 via <https://www.shu.ac.uk/about-us/governance-and-strategy/strategy>.

<sup>17</sup> Sheffield Hallam University (12 May 2022). *Sheffield Hallam named Higher Education Institution of the Year*. Accessed on 27 May 2022 via <https://www.shu.ac.uk/news/all-articles/latest-news/hallam-named-he-institution-of-the-year>.



students' opportunities.<sup>18</sup> Despite these efforts, our research, triangulated with that from awarding gap information as collected and collated by the university, has found that some students are not achieving or receiving the experience they should. Furthermore, with the growing cost of living crisis, our research on period poverty has found that students are seeking assistance to ensure that they receive fair opportunities to take part in their learning.

### 1.3.1 Diversity in our curriculum

The use of the terms BAME (or Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic) and BME (or Black and Minority Ethnic) has been debated in recent years.<sup>19</sup> The key to appropriate usage of collective terms is to be clear on why one is choosing to it and to be aware if the use of a collective term helps or hinders. The term 'BAME' does mask awarding gap differences within and between ethnic minority groups. In addition, at Sheffield Hallam Students' Union, there is a lack of clarity around preferred collective terminology; for example, there is the Liberation Rep (titled the 'BME' Rep) and student-staff that research and campaign for minority ethnic students (titled the 'BAME' Ambassadors).

Our research, '*Lived experience: barriers to academic achievement and perceptions of BAME targeted campaigns*', asked respondents of an ethnic minority background whether they identified with the term BAME, or if they preferred an alternative. Fifty-three percent of respondents identified with the term, though 24 percent stated that they did not identify with the term. When respondents were asked if they prefer an alternative term to 'BAME', 38 percent of respondents claimed they preferred to be referred to by their individual ethnicity. Some respondents expressed a desire to be treated either as an individual person, or within their individual culture to reflect differences in experience across minority groups.

*"I think grouping together in a minoritised group way can detract from the individual and unique experiences of each individual culture and fails to recognise the nuances that people of certain backgrounds may experience. In my academic journey, I have had no interaction with support staff who are from a minority background and I feel there has always been a lack of connection with them as I feel whilst they may try to empathise with any issues or worries I have disclosed, they fail to truly understand them and advise on them."*

*"Individuals should be put into positions based on merit and not purely for diversity. I personally do not want to be known as a 'great BAME engineer', I want to be a great engineer full stop."*

We acknowledge the unique experiences of all students and want them to have access to all the opportunities afforded to them, regardless of their ethnicity. We also, however, must acknowledge that while it may seem uncomfortable or unfair to regard ethnic minority students separately from White British students, students of a minority background are often not provided the same opportunities and outcomes compared to white students. As the above student states, you can be a great engineer no matter your ethnicity; we just need to make sure that great engineers are not being treated unfairly because of their ethnicity.

The degree awarding gap is a term that refers to the difference between white students and Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) students in receiving a first class or upper second-class Honours

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<sup>18</sup> Tes Magazine (18 March 2022). *Disadvantaged children are not being pushed as hard as they can be*. Accessed on 27 May 2022 via <https://www.tes.com/magazine/analysis/general/university-access-john-blake-office-for-students-man-who-wants-schools-and-universities-team-tackle-attainment>.

<sup>19</sup> Malik, S., Ryder, M., Marsden, S., Lawson, R. and Gee, M. 2021. BAME: A report on the use of the term and responses to it. Sir Lenny Henry Centre for Media Diversity. Accessed on 20 May 2022 via: <https://www.bcu.ac.uk/media/research/sir-lenny-henry-centre-for-media-diversity/research>.



degree at undergraduate level. Sheffield Hallam University has an awarding gap 6 percentage points larger than the sector average as of 2020/21<sup>20</sup> which the Vice Chancellor has conceded is unacceptable.<sup>21</sup> Although these statistics have improved in the years since they were quoted in our 2018/19 Student Voice Report<sup>22</sup>, they still make for uncomfortable reading, with Black students specifically receiving good Honours at rates of 24 percentage points behind white students.<sup>20</sup> The National Union of Students (NUS) advised in their #ClosingTheGap report that universities should be open with students about their awarding gaps and the steps they are taking to change their institutional culture to one of inclusivity.<sup>23</sup> The NUS<sup>23</sup> identified several potential contributing factors to the degree awarding gap, including preparedness for study, diverse and inclusive curricula, and sense of belonging. Preparedness for higher education encompasses additional factors such as prior educational achievement, access to guidance from parents and guardians who have attended university, and socioeconomic background.

The university's work with the Academic Development & Diversity Team to act on awarding gaps in each department and to address institutional culture is beneficial, but it is not clear how awareness, knowledge, and impact of this ongoing work is shared with students. Our research found that only 21 percent of students indicated they were aware of the BAME awarding gap, and there was no difference when analysed by ethnic group. This could suggest a lack of openness with the student community about the existence of the BAME awarding gap, and the steps being taken to address it.

**Recommendation 7: The University to continually update students on projects designed to eliminate the BAME awarding gap to ensure that students made aware and held accountable.**

The NUS state that “*creating racially diverse and inclusive environments*” should be a key component to addressing the gap.<sup>23</sup> Efforts to decolonise the curriculum, such as including materials from ethnic minority academics and non-European canon, is an important aspect of closing the BAME awarding gap. The initiative to decolonise the curriculum has been on the UK Higher Education radar since around 2016, with University College London running their “*Why is my curriculum white?*” campaign, later picked up by the NUS and universities across the country.<sup>24</sup> Sheffield Hallam has published plans to decolonise, or at minimum to diversify, curricula at a department level<sup>25</sup>, although it is not entirely clear how far each department is along in their goal. Our research asked students about their awareness of curriculum diversifying efforts. Only 23 percent of respondents had heard of the

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<sup>20</sup> Office for Students. Access and Participation Data Dashboard. Accessed 6 May 2022 via: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard>.

<sup>21</sup> Sheffield Hallam University. BAME Degree Awarding Gap. Accessed 12 May 2022 via: <https://www.shu.ac.uk/about-us/our-values/equality-and-diversity/bame-degree-awarding-gap>.

<sup>22</sup> Sheffield Hallam Students' Union. Student Voice Report 2018/19. Accessed 6 May via: <https://www.hallamstudentsunion.com/pageassets/representation/research/svr/SVR-2018-19-Final-Version.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> National Union of Students. 2019. Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Student Attainment at UK Universities: #ClosingTheGap. Accessed 6 May 2022 via: <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/sites/default/files/field/downloads/2021-07/bame-student-attainment.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> Abou El Magd, N. (9 February 2016). *Why is my curriculum white? – decolonising the academy*. National Union of Students (NUS). Accessed on 31 May 2022 via <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/articles/why-is-my-curriculum-white-decolonising-the-academy>.

<sup>25</sup> Sheffield Hallam University (27 April 2021). *Decolonising the Curriculum*. Narrowing the Gaps. Accessed on 31 May 2022 via <https://blogs.shu.ac.uk/narrowingthegaps/decolonising-the-curriculum>.

Decolonise the Curriculum campaign and, specifically, were cognisant of efforts at Sheffield Hallam to diversify the curriculum.

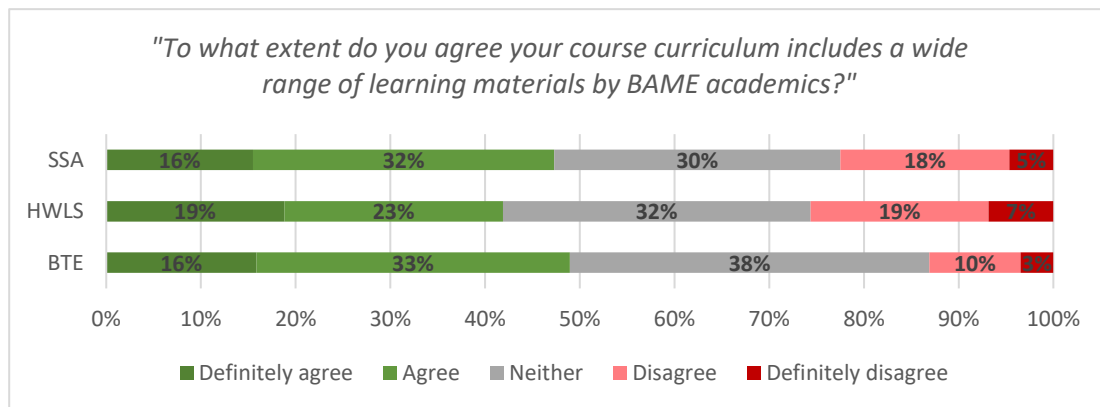


Figure 1: Student perceptions of the diversity of their curriculum, by College.

Nearly half, or 46 percent, of respondents agreed that their course curriculum contained a wide range of learning materials by ethnic minority academics, although these proportions differed between ethnic groups. For example, only 26 percent of students of a mixed ethnicity background agreed that their course contains materials by ethnic minority academics, compared with 56 percent of Chinese students. These questions were also analysed at a college level, with similar proportions of students in each of the three colleges agreeing that their course contains materials by BAME academics (Figure 1). Students in HWLS appeared the least confident of their courses including diverse materials, with lower proportions of these students agreeing with the statement, and higher proportions disagreeing compared to the other two colleges.

Although work is ongoing in this area, our research has found that students are worried that work to decolonise the curriculum is taking place without adequate input from BAME students or academics. As students expressed, work might perpetuate a colonial system whereby white staff are taking lead and making decisions on behalf of BAME individuals. Furthermore, as discussed above, the marketisation of higher education means that decolonisation without adequate accountability with students could lead to unfounded praise for academic staff, rather than its intention: to make the curriculum inclusive, relevant, and culturally accurate.

**Recommendation 8: The University and the Students’ Union to continue the progress of decolonising and diversifying reading lists.**

1.3.2 International student experiences

A barrier that international students may face upon arrival to Sheffield Hallam is knowledge of what is expected from them in their studies. The library offers Skills Support Seminars, and some international students through our ‘Lived experience: barriers to academic achievement and perceptions of BAME targeted campaigns’ research project expressed that they had used these sessions. Others, however, said that they wished Skills Centre had been better advertised to them at the start of their degree. In one interview, an international student stated that their course mates typically turn to each other for assistance on assignments, as their lecturers and course leaders expect them to come with a certain level of understanding on the topic before asking for help.

For Sheffield Hallam, the majority of international students are studying at the postgraduate taught level, meaning there is an expectation that they are well prepared for university study based on having already completed undergraduate degree(s). However, due to differing learning conventions and expectations across the diverse home countries of our student body, assumptions of readiness means that not all international students begin their studies on similar levels. One student, when asked where they would go to access academic assistance, described a system amongst international students on their course of mutual academic aid:

*“Whenever we have an assignment, we basically identify who understands it, then we book a room in the library and do it kind of like a tutorial. When we came in a lot of African [students] had problems with report writing. I’ve worked in a research company... so I had a good understanding of writing reports. So that first semester I was basically teaching people how to write reports. So that was what we did, that was how we studied.”*

**Recommendation 9: The University to increase international student awareness of study skills and support sessions available pre-arrival/on arrival to enable understanding and progression through their course.**

## Section 2: Our well-being and community

As our ‘Hallam, How Are We Doing?’ survey found, 62 percent of respondents indicated that they have struggled with stress or anxiety which has had a significant negative impact on their personal well-being. This was the top struggle that respondents shared, including keeping up with the workload as the second highest point of struggle (51%). Similarly, research by Accenture & Cybil<sup>26</sup> found that at the height of the Coronavirus pandemic, whilst stress and anxiety was high across the country, respondents indicated that they were more worried about doing well at university (73% frequently worried about this) than they were about their or others physical health (47% frequently worried about this). As Accenture & Cybil explain, 39 percent of respondents indicated that their mental health declined since starting university. Similarly, previous research we have conducted with Sheffield Hallam students also found that students mental health declined once they started university, compared to before, and that Sheffield Hallam was worse compared to other participating universities.<sup>27</sup>

The mental health difficulties that students face are not a result of the pandemic; they were present amongst student lives prior, nor are they on track to improve as the restrictions and changes begin to shift to a sense of normal. Considering this, the question remains: what is the capacity of universities to help ease stress and anxiety amongst students? Universities are only a microcosm of our larger society and the stress and anxiety that are felt by our students are felt by our staff too.<sup>28</sup> The past few years have provided evidence of the importance of community in individuals’ lives; the impact of strong community ties have far-reaching positive influence. This is especially pertinent given that, despite our virtual interconnectedness, more adults than ever before are feeling lonely.<sup>29</sup> As this section will explore, the Students’ Union and the university have joint responsibility for ensuring that students transition into and through higher education, to improve their own well-being and foster a sense of belonging through opportunities provided by both organisations.

### 2.1 Awareness of services

Our ‘Hallam, How Are We Doing?’ survey (March 2022, wave 2) found that just over half of respondents (53%) were aware of the University’s Student Wellbeing Service. Though the research we conducted on student mental well-being this academic year was limited, the small number of conversations we held through our Breakfast Club focus groups indicate that some students are still unaware of what additional services and offers the university has which can help them to look after their mental health. Breakfast Club focus groups served as an informal place for a small number of students to share, highlighting the trigger points of stress which impacted their experience at university. We found that the main stressors that led students to contemplate seeking support from the university were: the ambiguity of assessments and study; course design such as placement stressors and discrepancies in organisation; safety in the city and on campus; virtual learning; and social pressures.

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<sup>26</sup> Accenture Research, & Cybil. (2021). *University: The best time of our lives?* Accessed on 12 April 2022 via [https://www.accenture.com/\\_acnmedia/PDF-158/Accenture-Student-Health-Research-Report.pdf](https://www.accenture.com/_acnmedia/PDF-158/Accenture-Student-Health-Research-Report.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Sheffield Hallam Students’ Union (2021). *Student Voice Report 2020/21*. Accessed on 12 April 2022 via [https://www.hallamstudentsunion.com/pageassets/representation/research/svr/Student\\_Voice\\_Report\\_2021\\_Final\\_Digital.pdf](https://www.hallamstudentsunion.com/pageassets/representation/research/svr/Student_Voice_Report_2021_Final_Digital.pdf).

<sup>28</sup> University & College Union (March 2022). *UK Higher Education: A workforce in crisis*. Accessed on 12 April 2022 via <https://www.ucu.org.uk/media/12532/HEReport24March22/pdf/HEReport24March22.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport (26 January 2022). “Tackling loneliness evidence review: main report”. Accessed on 22 April 2022 via <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/tackling-loneliness-evidence-review/tackling-loneliness-evidence-review-full-report>.

As Bowles et al<sup>30</sup> indicate, stressors affect students' retention, engagement, and satisfaction. A wide range of external and internal factors have a discernible impact upon a student's experience in higher education. Furthermore, research suggests that the main factors which enable a smooth transition for first-year students specifically are generally outside of their control through course design, social events, and facilities, for example.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, as we found in our conversations with a small number of students during Breakfast Club, many of the factors that caused stress at university were outside of the students' individual control. The stressors that participants spoke about were things such as digital literacy and/or cost of living and inflation. As is explored more below, our 'Hallam, How Are We Doing?' survey found that one of the top negative impacts on personal well-being at university is keeping up with the workload.

The stressors mentioned above meant that some participants had at least considered accessing support offered by the Students' Union or the university. There were, however, some barriers to accessing support such as: a lack of awareness of university services (a dominant theme throughout all Breakfast Clubs); sensitive or complex mental health issues that students saw the university services unable to help with; and self-stigmatisation. Similarly, as Millings & Barkham<sup>32</sup> found, self-stigma was a prominent reason that students might not seek help. Students might see hardship through university as a prerequisite for working life; that is, feeling low and overworked is part of being a student nowadays.

As was mentioned previously, just over half of respondents to our 'Hallam, How Are We Doing?' survey in March 2022 were aware of the University's Wellbeing Service. Though there might be some barriers to accessing this service, ensuring that students are provided with this information might have to mitigate issues where problems do arise.

**Recommendation 10: The University to increase awareness of student well-being service and resources available through co-produced slides on display pre / post lectures.**

2.2 Accessing products

Period poverty, or the lack of access to sanitary products due to financial constraints, has an overt impact on education and can, for some, impact their ability to attend university. This creates a further barrier whereby those who menstruate are not receiving a holistic and well-rounded higher education experience.<sup>33</sup> From our Period Poverty Survey, which received over 200 responses from students across the university, we received comments from students who found affording sanitary products difficult. As one student explains:

*"Access to free supplies would help to alleviate some of the economic strain having a period provides. Lack of access to menstrual supplies can have an impact on education. Without access to supplies, students often miss class or do not participate as vigorously for fear of leakage and embarrassment."*

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<sup>30</sup> Bowles, Fisher, R., McPhail, R., Rosenstreich, D., & Dobson, A. (2014). *Staying the distance: students' perceptions of enablers of transition to higher education*. Higher Education Research and Development, 33(2), 212–225. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2013.832157>.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Broglia, Millings, A., & Barkham, M. (2021). *Student mental health profiles and barriers to help seeking: When and why students seek help for a mental health concern*. Counselling and Psychotherapy Research, 21(4), 816-826.

<sup>33</sup> Ennis, A, Donovan-Hall, L, Standing and Mistry, V. (2020) *Lifting the lid on period poverty in higher education: a student engagement perspective*.

*Offering free and accessible period products can help more students and more over it reduces stress on women's shelters, and reduces waste, especially if the products provided are eco-friendly!”*

Recently, Scotland announced that free products will be available in schools through a government funded scheme. This means that free sanitary products will enable students to attend, take part in, and engage with their education. In addition, the University of Edinburgh, Heriot-Watt University, and Glasgow Caledonian University work with the charity Hey Girls<sup>34</sup> to provide free sanitary products in appropriate spaces on campus. There are some English universities that have adopted similar schemes.<sup>35</sup> Our Period Poverty Survey found that 84 percent of respondents would like to see free sanitary products in toilets across campuses, compared to 48 percent of respondents who would like Sheffield Hallam to provide free period products at Hallam Help points using the words *Tammy* (for tampons) or *Patricia* (for pads). Considering the practicalities of this for most menstruating students, it is difficult to move from one space to the Hallam Help desks without an uncomfortable and unpleasant experience.

*“I was surprised to see no machines installed in the toilets for period products. I am mostly equipped and prepared in advance for periods, but generally speaking if someone is caught short; it’s practically not very comfortable to walk to a Hallam help point and ask for ‘Tammy’ or ‘Patricia’ as the damage gets done by the time someone (me personally who experiences heavy bleeding) walks to the point. It’s accessible if the machines are inside the toilets for most subsidised price (if not for free).”*

Previously, our Wellbeing, Sport, & Physical Activity Officer worked closely with the University to implement the Caught Short Scheme. Whilst this work has been helpful towards providing products for students, our Officers believe more can be done. This scheme currently requires students and staff to approach specific help desk points to ask for period products, which are provided free of charge. Our research sought to formalise student views on the issue of period poverty and accessibility of products, whilst campaigning to bring awareness to period poverty as a student wellbeing concern. Since this, we have formalised two projects: piloting free menstrual products in select locations across university and subscription scheme to ensure students have the products they need.

**Recommendation 11: The Students’ Union continue to monitor student need regarding menstrual product accessibility to ensure an inclusive learning experience for all students.**

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<sup>34</sup> Hey Girls Charity. Accessed on 29 April 2022 via <https://www.heygirls.co.uk>.

<sup>35</sup> Sheffield Hallam Students’ Union (2022). *Period Poverty*. Accessed on 29 April 2022 via <https://www.hallamstudentsunion.com/news/article/6013/Period-Poverty>.

### 2.3 Transitioning into and through university

When respondents to our 'Hallam, How Are We Doing?' survey (November 2021, wave 1) were asked to indicate factors which had a significant negative impact on their personal well-being, two-thirds stated that stress and anxiety had. Half of respondents (51%) indicated keeping up with their workload and 45 percent shared that work/life balance had a negative impact. As previously mentioned in Section 1, final-year undergraduate students were more likely than any other level of study to indicate that their university experience has been significantly negatively impaired by the pandemic. As Figure 2 displays, 19 percent of final-year undergraduate respondents disagreed that they feel the university cares about their well-being, compared to 12 percent of all respondents.

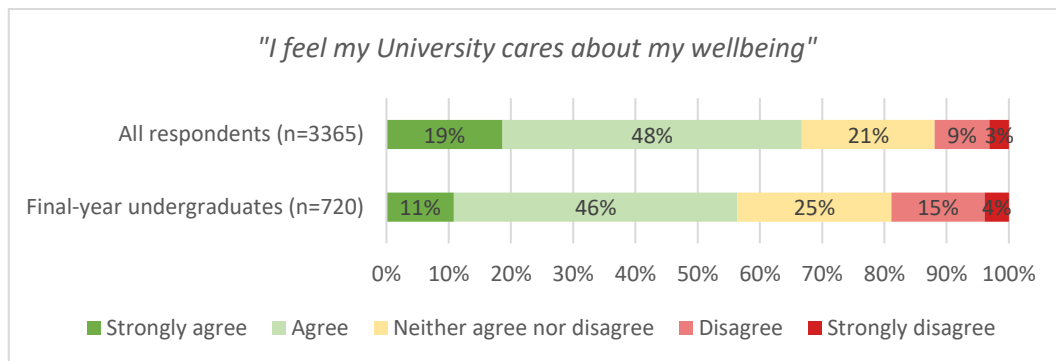


Figure 2: Responses to 'Hallam, How Are We Doing?' survey, November 2021.

Similarly, as we know from previous research conducted with Sheffield Hallam students<sup>36</sup>, students are much more likely to speak to friends or family should they have any mental well-being struggles during their time at university. Just over a quarter of respondents to 'Hallam, How Are We Doing?' survey stated that they had spoken to academic staff or lecturers when they were struggling with personal well-being. As was recommended in the 2020/21 Student Voice Report, academic advisers have continued to be offered training and materials or signposting students should they need help outside of the realm of academic support (see Appendix B).

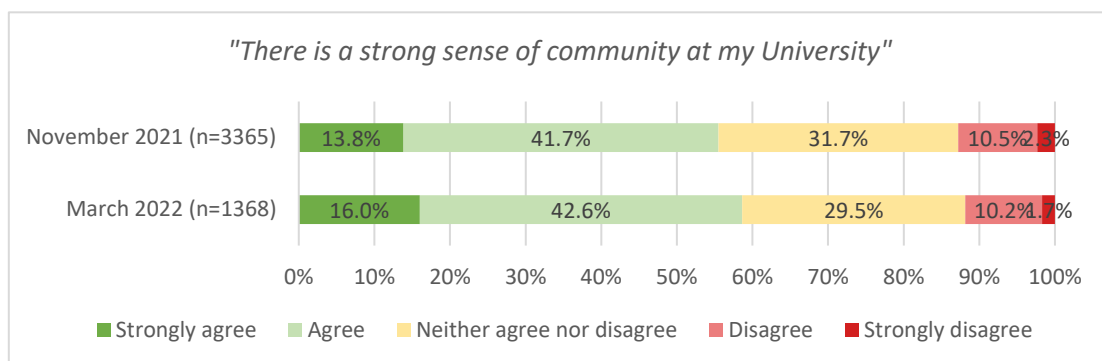


Figure 3: Responses to 'Hallam, How Are We Doing?' Survey, wave 1 (November 2021) and wave 2 (March 2022) comparison.

As first-year and second-year students this academic year transition through their course, the university should consider the ways in which students can see the university has fostered a caring

<sup>36</sup> Alterline & Sheffield Hallam Students' Union (2021). "Being Well, Doing Well". Accessed on 22 April via <https://www.hallamstudentsunion.com/pageassets/representation/research/SHSU-Alterline-BWDW-Final-Slides.pdf>.



environment. This year’s final-year students’ experiences have been drastically impacted by the pandemic, much of which meant a dramatic and unexpected shift. We should, however, reflect on what upcoming second and third-year students’ experiences are and have been. Students are always transitioning through their higher education experience – from foundation level through to postgraduate research – and each requires a nuanced and considered approach.

As our ‘Hallam, How Are We Doing?’ survey indicates, there were no substantial differences in student opinions about the sense of community at Sheffield Hallam between November 2021 (wave 1) and March (wave 2); see Figure 3. There were, however, drastic differences between levels of study. Final-year undergraduate respondents were much more likely to indicate that they disagreed that there is a strong sense of community at Sheffield Hallam, compared to first-year undergraduates. As is evidenced in Figure 4, 20 percent of undergraduate final-year respondents disagreed there was a strong sense of community at university in November 2021, compared to 8 percent of undergraduate first-year respondents. Though only 7 percent of undergraduate first-year respondents disagreed with this statement in March 2022, there was an 11 percent rise in those students who replied neutrally. Although efforts to create genuine student communities through events and activities are well-intended, they might not have had the expected impact. As Figure 4 displays, students’ sense of community decreases through an undergraduate students’ journey. It is not clear, however, whether this is a long-lasting impact due to COVID-19, or the indicative of a typical student journey. As is discussed below, the more students believe their interactions and activities to be personally relevant, the more involved in university life they will become.

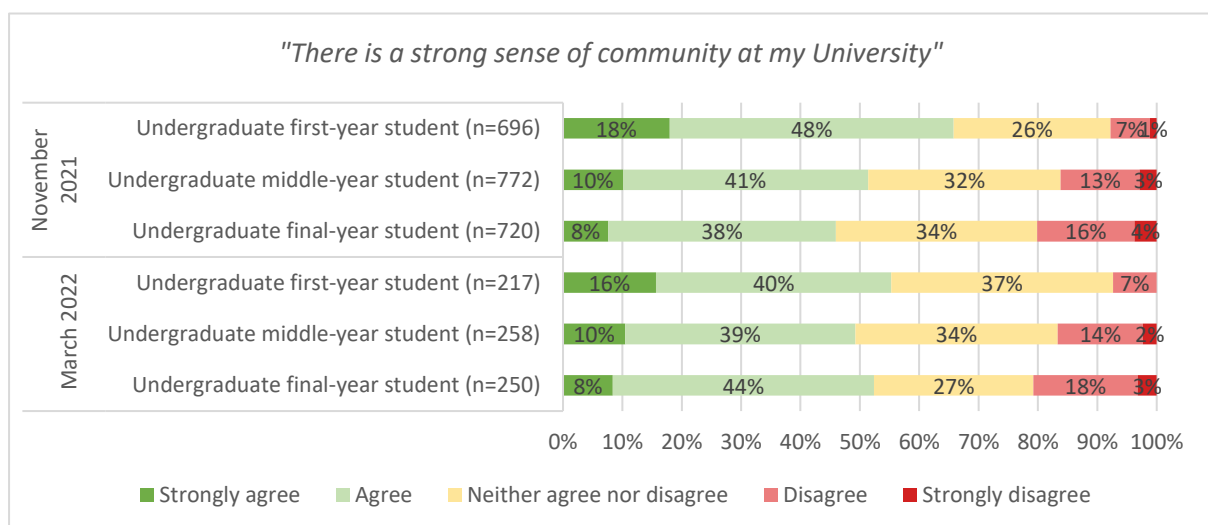


Figure 4: Responses to 'Hallam, How Are We Doing?' Survey, wave 1 (November 2021) and wave 2 (March 2022) comparison for undergraduate respondents by level.

Furthermore, the majority of Sheffield Hallam’s students come from quintile 1 (Q1) and quintile 2 (Q2) areas, the most deprived areas of higher education participation by local area, and this has increased over time. As the Office for Students<sup>37</sup> data indicates, in 2016/17, 43 percent of entrants at Sheffield Hallam were from Q1 or Q2 areas and in 2020/21, 48 percent were. This signifies a 5

<sup>37</sup> Office for Students (OfS) (2022). Access and participation data dashboard. Accessed on 9 May 2022 via <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/data-and-analysis/access-and-participation-data-dashboard>.



percent increase. As Merrill (2015)<sup>38</sup> states, little research has focussed on working class students' experiences of transition into higher education. Given Sheffield Hallam's movement towards encouraging and increasing entrants into and through higher education where participation is historically low, we should not neglect the multiple barriers that working-class and marginalised students face. This also means remaining sensitive to the long-term effects of COVID-19 on students who might not have the same introduction or awareness of higher education which has been embedded in the lives of students from other backgrounds. Research that has looked at students' senses of belonging to their respective institutions has become a focal point within higher education recently.<sup>39</sup> There are different ways that one can understand belonging in higher education: explore what the student can do to engage with and improve their own university experience or investigate what the institution can do to make it easier for students to engage with the university.

Our research, exploring first-year students' transitions through university, found both students and universities share responsibility for generating a sense of connectedness and belonging. When asked what belonging and connectedness meant to them, participants shared that the university community, through interactions with course mates and friends, the connection to their course and their sense of place and space were the main factors. Similarly, as Meehan & Howells<sup>40</sup> state: *"Belonging and the process to belong requires the complex interaction of three factors, which include the environment, social, and cognitive attributes which when combined support students feeling of connectedness or belonging."* Due to the impact that COVID-19 has had on students' lives, what it means to belong to and within the university ought to be reimaged. As one participant shared:

*"Not being able to actually attend uni physically. I don't really feel like I am there. I don't feel like I am getting value for money from my course. There is no way to communicate with people to seek help and online lessons are a challenge."*

As the student above states, they felt as though their presence was not validated, as though they did not belong. Mohamedhosein & Crul (2018)<sup>41</sup> explain student learning in higher education occurs through both the psychological need of the student, their motivations for engaging in activities and the relationship between social and academic integration, or their involvement with peers and tutors. Furthermore, Gradišek & Polak (2021)<sup>42</sup> argue that the sudden shift to online education enormously challenged the psychological and social integration of students, which was necessary for a smooth transition from secondary to tertiary education. Students develop higher education competencies, but there must be a successful interaction between student autonomy and the

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<sup>38</sup> Merrill, B. (2015). *Determined to stay or determined to leave? A tale of learner identities, biographies and adult students in higher education*. *Studies in Higher Education (Dorchesteron-Thames)*, 40(10), 1859–1871. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2014.914918>.

<sup>39</sup> Gopalan, Linden-Carmichael, A., & Lanza, S. (2022). *College Students' Sense of Belonging and Mental Health Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic*. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 70(2), 228–233. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.10.010>.

<sup>40</sup> Meehan, & Howells, K. (2018). "What really matters to freshers?": evaluation of first year student experience of transition into university. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 42(7), 893–907. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2017.1323194>.

<sup>41</sup> Mohammedhosein, & Crul, M. R. . (2018). The relationship between first year students' interaction, basic psychological needs, and academic success. *American Journal of Educational Research (Print)*, 6(12), 1702–1709

<sup>42</sup> Polona Gradišek, & Alenka Polak. (2021). Insights into learning and examination experience of higher education students during the Covid-19 pandemic. *Sodobna Pedagogika*, 72, 286–307

relatedness to their new climate.<sup>43</sup> The relatedness, as Mohamedhosein & Crul state, is one's familiarity to teaching, learning and assessment, as was discussed in Section 1.

The more students believe their interactions and activities to be personally relevant, the more involved in university life they will become. The social factors, which should allow for interactions between students and provide activities which are personally relevant, are developed at Sheffield Hallam through a multitude of ways. Some areas, which participants highlighted are: Welcome Week, accommodation, and the Students' Union.

As has been discussed, both the learning environment, space, and place within the university play a fundamental role in students' engagement, which in turn increases their belonging and connectedness with their university. To belong is to have authentic exchanges between students, peers, and tutors.

**Recommendation 12: The University to review student community and provide tailored events and activities for each level of study, recognising the nuanced differences between academic levels.**

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<sup>43</sup> Meehan, & Howells, K. (2018). "What really matters to freshers?": evaluation of first year student experience of transition into university. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 42(7), 893–907. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2017.1323194>.

### The Students' Union

Similarly, Students' Unions have long been a space whereby students can freely connect and collaborate with one another. Our research has found that the Union still has a fundamental role in helping students feel as though they belong to Sheffield Hallam and is crucial to creating and maintaining relationships with fellow students. Our participants frequently mentioned how important joining societies has helped this process:

*"I get involved with the Student Union quite a bit. I've actually become a social media manager for one of the societies. It's helped me meet people and create things for students which in turn has helped me."*

Furthermore, the plethora and frequency of events put on gave students further feelings of connectedness to the university landscape.

*"I've enjoyed the Student Union events... They've put on quite a lot of stuff so that's been good."*

There were some participants, however, that were disappointed with the presence of the Students' Union at Collegiate Campus:

*"I'm based at Collegiate Campus we don't have a Union presence, so I don't feel like I belong to that side of things even more because there's nothing there to belong to... It just looks like an office. It's not what you would expect from a Union."*

Students based at Collegiate Campus spoke of the disconnect between the two campuses, not just in the context of the Students' Union, but the university in its entirety. As one student called Collegiate, further highlighting the separateness of the two campuses, 'a uni away from uni'. First-year participants in our research, however, noted how important the Students' Union is to help foster a sense of belonging, one that should not be exclusive to students based at City Campus.

**Recommendation 13: The Students' Union to review Collegiate Campus presence to increase student activity and engagement.**

## Welcome

Welcome week acts as an important phase of orientation and understanding of a new educational climate for university learners. Evidence from Sheffield Hallam's 2021 Welcome Survey indicates that when compared to the 2020 Welcome Survey, new students felt that the weeks helped them feel more connected with other students, to their university, and to their Students' Union. There were also significant increases in the percentages of new students that agreed they felt part of the student community at Sheffield Hallam and are happy with the friendships they had made.

Despite this, our research with first-year students transitioning into higher education found that students had certain expectations of their welcome week which were not met. Students wanted the opportunity to meet new people in-person, but, as one participant shared, the majority of their welcome week occurred online.

*"...my Welcome Week was all online, and it sucked really. In my first week I hadn't met a soul."*

Although there were events which were in-person, students saw their welcome occurring primarily through and with their course (that is, not through the events and activities organised by the Students' Union and the university outside of the course-related activity).

## Our Accommodation

In addition, accommodation is an important place for first-year students. A space where they can make friends, grow and develop as they move into and through their first-year. As one participant shared:

*"I think it's basically this community feeling that we get both in our accommodation and in our classes as well because even though I don't go much for these societies, or I don't take part in much of them, but I still feel a part of this Hallam community."*

Throughout COVID-19, the iterative lockdowns impacted students living-quarters and played an integral part towards sense of belonging to the university community. Students spent condensed periods of time with fellow students: some who they knew prior to university, and some they did not. Irrespective of COVID-19, student halls have long been a space for social interaction and maintaining lasting friendships, an integral facet of belonging. Understanding the impact of social spatiality in relation to belonging is crucial. Our participants shared that the pandemic has had a long-term effect on their accommodation choice, opting for a less private space so as not to live alone should future lockdowns occur.

*"I am in a 6-person flat in student halls. I chose it because I didn't want to live alone. The pandemic drew me to that choice"*

## 2.4: Housing for international students

Just as building a course community through university and Students' Union activities is important for all students, so too is where they live. As mentioned previously, accommodation is important for all students. Where they live impacts on their ability to rest, learn, and feel safe, motivated, and inspired. Our International Students' Officer, hearing anecdotally international students' dissatisfaction with their accommodation search and options, asked students to share their opinions through our International Students' Housing Survey.

Of the 129 respondents, 59 percent indicated that their experience of searching for accommodation was bad and that the process was difficult; only 39 percent thought that the information about accommodation Sheffield Hallam provided prior to moving to the UK was accurate for them. The majority of respondents were postgraduate taught students, some with families, and this meant that their accommodation needs were different than other students. Where respondents did eventually find housing in the UK, the location might not be what they expected (with some travelling more than hour to get to university). As Fang & van Liempt (2021)<sup>44</sup> state, international students must navigate an unfamiliar housing market, as well as language and cultural differences, which means that their accommodation search is very different from home students. Limited research also means that the awareness of the breadth of the issue for international students is not fully known.

In addition, a particular issue for international students was the requirement to either have a guarantor in the UK or to pay for their accommodation costs for at least six months in advance. For these students, coming to study in the UK is an expensive endeavour: the cost of their course, their visa, and suitable, safe, and accurate housing. Whilst international students are often seen homogeneously as a financially privileged group, previous research suggest that this is not the norm for all.<sup>45</sup> As our survey found, the most common reason that respondents were dissatisfied with their accommodation was the expense and the distance to campus. For these respondents, housing in the UK is expensive and, without accommodation organised prior to entry into the UK, many resort to staying in hotels until they are able to find something suitable for their needs – both budgetarily and otherwise.

*“Because the house is expensive and I had to pay 10 month advance rent which took away all the money for part of my school fees and feeding. I had to do this because that was the only option I had then because I have been wasting money on hotels and the moving from one hotel to the other is driving me crazy.”*

Furthermore, for students with families that need to come to the UK to stay with them whilst they are studying, Sheffield Hallam advises international students to either secure housing for their whole family prior to entry into the UK, or to travel to the UK alone and then find suitable housing afterwards.<sup>46</sup> Eighty-three percent of respondents to our survey indicated that they sought accommodation prior to entry into the UK and/or once they arrived in the UK through using various websites, family, friends, or previous students to help their search. Fifty percent of respondents

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<sup>44</sup> Christian Fang & Ilse van Liempt (2021) *'We prefer our Dutch': International students' housing experiences in the Netherlands*. *Housing Studies*, 36:6, 822-842, DOI: 10.1080/02673037.2020.1720618.

<sup>45</sup> Malet Calvo, D. (2018) *Understanding international students beyond studentification: A new class of transnational urban consumers. The example of Erasmus students in Lisbon (Portugal)*. *Urban Studies*, 55, pp. 2142–2158.

<sup>46</sup> Sheffield Hallam University (2022). *International students: Arriving in Sheffield - Students with families*. Accessed on 19 May 2022 via <https://www.shu.ac.uk/international/international-experience-team/students-with-families>.

indicated that they had used University Accommodation Services to help in their search for suitable housing – a much higher percentage than has been found in similar surveys where between 7 and 40 percent had used their university’s accommodation information.<sup>47</sup> Despite this, the university’s accommodation site, whilst it advertises housing for families, the number of suitable homes or flats for families is limited.<sup>48</sup> When asked to comment on their experience of finding accommodation, 52 respondents shared negative stories. As one respondent stated:

*“Getting private accommodation has been difficult and stressful as an international student. Because I have a family, I cannot live in school or students’ accommodation. I spent a lot of time and money viewing a variety of houses but of course as a newcomer to the UK, most agents and landlords are not willing to rent out to you. This has been physically, psychologically, and emotionally stressful for me. It also affected my studies too.”*

This is crucial to consider as the number of international students coming to study in the UK rises<sup>49</sup>, the number of international students choosing to study at Sheffield Hallam increases<sup>50</sup> and the university has strategic ambitions to continue to attract international students. Furthermore, Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) international students, who participated in our ‘*Lived experience: barriers to academic achievement and perceptions of BAME targeted campaigns*’ research project, detailed barriers faced finding family-friendly, affordable accommodation within the Sheffield area. Students shared that they were unable to bring their children to live in Sheffield due to an inability to find family housing or reluctance of landlords to let to them. Some students also expressed confusion as to who they can turn to for assistance with these issues.

*“If they [SHU] are facilitating it, giving opportunities to the students to come along with family, then the very first thing that comes in is to provide them with the proper accommodation, and I could not find it here.”*

**Recommendation 14: The University and the Students’ Union to provide more information for international students with families about the considerations involved in finding somewhere to live - and ensure this is better publicised to them before they and their families leave their home country. The University to work to increase the number of partners within the Snug scheme who can provide family accommodation.**

## 2.5: Diverse student communities

A sense of belonging at higher education institutions is a key component to attainment at university; according to the National Union of Students (NUS), social inclusion is key for improving the experience of BAME students.<sup>51</sup> In our research, UK domiciled students of a BAME background were less likely than white students to be members of societies and sports teams at Sheffield Hallam, with 87 percent of UK-domiciled BAME students claiming they were not in any societies compared to 72 percent of UK-domiciled white students. When students were asked why they chose not to join

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<sup>47</sup> Obeng-Odoom, F. (2012) *Far away from home: the housing question and international students in Australia*. Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management, 34:2, 201-216, DOI: 10.1080/1360080X.2012.662744.

<sup>48</sup> Official Sheffield Hallam University Private Housing Listings (2022). Accessed on 19 May 2022 via <https://www.shustudenthousing.co.uk/Accommodation>.

<sup>49</sup> Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (2022). Where do HE students come from? Accessed on 18 May 2022 via <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/students/where-from>.

<sup>50</sup> Sheffield Hallam University internal data (The Source). Accessed on 18 May 2022.

<sup>51</sup> National Union of Students (2011). Race for Equality: a report on the experiences of Black students in further and higher education. Accessed on 23 May 2022 via: <https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/race-for-equality-a-report-on-the-experiences-of-black-students-in-further-and-higher-education-2011>.

societies, 44 percent of respondents cited time constraints. Our research also found that UK-domiciled BAME students were less likely to participate in paid work while studying with 54 percent participating in part- or full-time work, compared to 61 percent of white students.

Despite this, time constraints might not be the only reason BAME students do not join in. Students of an ethnic minority background may shy away from joining societies if they observe a lack of diversity, as well as the culture of societies playing a role. For example, social activities that focus on drinking may be exclusionary to Muslim students or those teetotal for other reasons. As Young & Davis<sup>52</sup> identified, social engagement is likely the highest contributing factor to a sense of belonging.

*“I feel like there’s not much variety of societies and many of them are catered towards just partying or going out. I understand that in many instances this is based on the personalities of the groups who run each individual society, but I feel it does stem from a wider cultural feel of the university.”*

Additionally, it might be that participation in societies has been stunted by the COVID-19 pandemic, where students might have shied away from societies in the past year due to Zoom fatigue. Some respondents described feelings of having missed their opportunities with societies (i.e., signing up in Welcome Week or starting studies with the intention of getting involved in societies, but losing track of this once their courses started). Likely, it can be intimidating to join societies midway through the year if the perception is that friendships have already been formed, therefore making it harder to be a newcomer.

Furthermore, each society within the Students’ Union elects an Equality and Diversity Officer, who may be well placed to address discrepancies in society participation between ethnic groups. Conversely, many Team Hallam teams do not currently have their Equality and Diversity committee position filled. Recent developments of racial bullying being normalised in professional sporting environments<sup>53</sup> may turn ethnic minority students away from joining organised university sports teams for fear of experiencing microaggressions and racist ‘banter’.

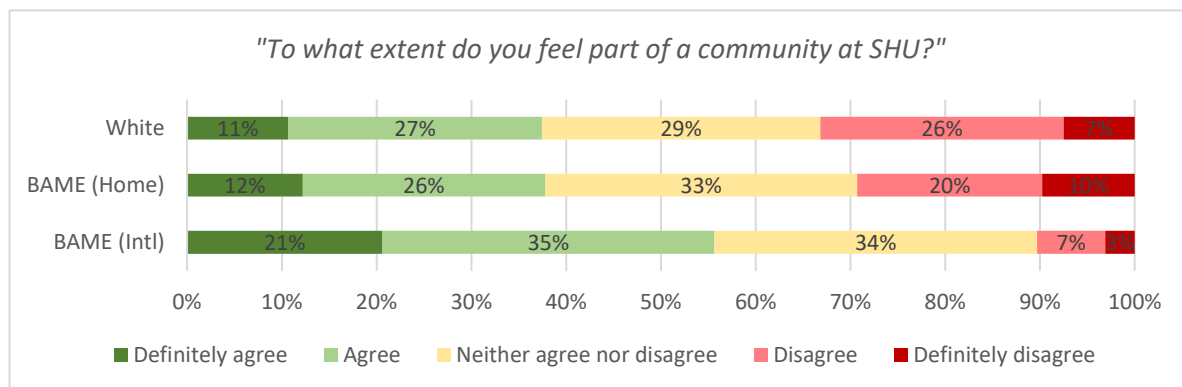


Figure 5: Rates of agreement of students feeling part of a community at SHU, by ethnicity and domicile.

Our research found that UK-domiciled BAME students tended to feel less positive about their sense of belonging, community and representation at Sheffield Hallam compared to UK-domiciled, white

<sup>52</sup> Young Ahn, M. & Davis, H.H. 2020. Four domains of students’ sense of belonging to university. *Studies in Higher Education*, 45(3). DOI: doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2018.1564902

<sup>53</sup> Sheffield Hallam University. 4<sup>th</sup> March 2022. New study finds professional football environment legitimises bullying masked as banter. Accessed on 6 May 2022 via: <https://www.shu.ac.uk/news/all-articles/latest-news/professional-football-bullying-banter>.

students and international BAME students. Twenty-one percent of UK-domiciled, BAME students disagreed they felt like they belonged at SHU, whereas only one international BAME student disagreed on this same statement. As demonstrated in Figure 5, UK-domiciled BAME students also replied more similarly to UK domiciled, white students compared to international BAME students (38 to percent compared to 56 percent). This is lower than we found in previous research where 43 percent of respondents agreed they felt part of a community of staff and students.<sup>54</sup>

UK-domiciled BAME students were also less likely to agree they feel represented at Sheffield Hallam, compared to international respondents and UK-domiciled white students (see Figure 6). As the majority of international respondents were also on postgraduate taught courses, it might be that their courses, or the societies that they join, have high numbers of international students and thus feel more represented than others. For UK-domiciled BAME students on undergraduate courses, they may be more likely to be in the minority on their course leading to more feelings of underrepresentation.

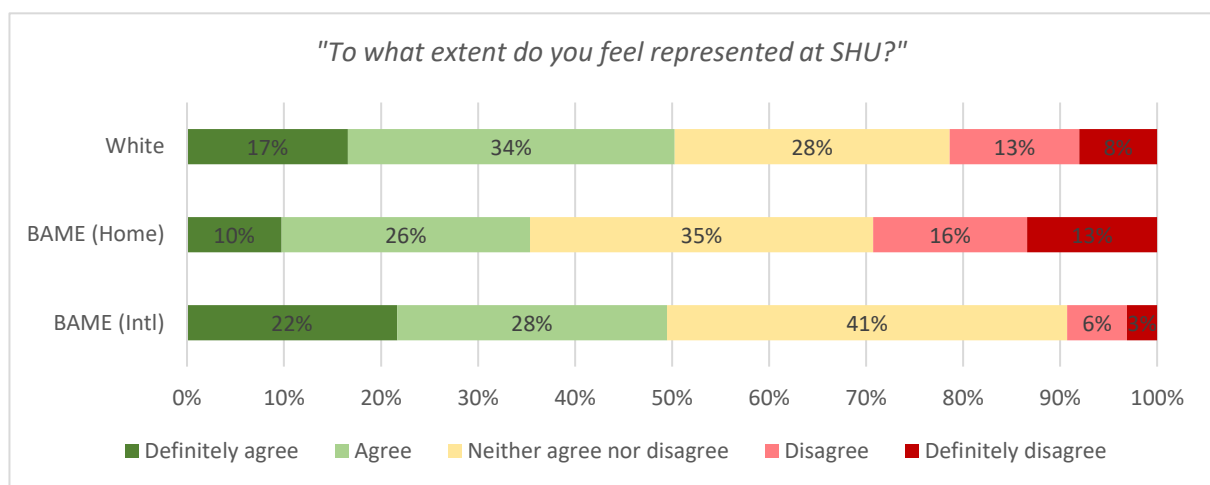


Figure 6: Rates of agreement of students feeling represented at SHU, by ethnicity and domicile.

For international students, previous research has found that they develop their social capital upon arrival by prioritising connection and socialisation with other international students.<sup>55</sup> International students who were interviewed as part of the *'Lived experience barriers to academic achievement and perceptions of BAME targeted campaigns'* research project corroborated this idea; participants described forming close friendships with people of a similar background as theirs upon arrival in Sheffield and this was sometimes due to the language and cultural barriers they faced. The desire to be in community with other students and to form social capital amongst other international students may be the reason BAME students in the international community agreed that their sense of belonging, community, and feelings of representation were higher than other respondents.

**Recommendation 15: The Students' Union to review the lack of participation in societies, clubs, and sport amongst UK-domiciled BAME students.**

<sup>54</sup> Sheffield Hallam Students' Union. 2021. Student Voice Report 2020/21. Accessed 6 May 2022 via [https://www.hallamstudentsunion.com/pageassets/representation/research/svr/Student\\_Voice\\_Report\\_2021\\_Final\\_Digital.pdf](https://www.hallamstudentsunion.com/pageassets/representation/research/svr/Student_Voice_Report_2021_Final_Digital.pdf).

<sup>55</sup> Montgomery, C & McDowell, L. 2009. Social Networks and the International Student Experience. *Journal of Studies in International Education*, 13(4). DOI: 10.1177/1028315308321994



### Section 3: Our collective student voice

Between 2018 and 2022, the percentages of respondents agreeing that staff value students' views and opinions has decreased by 10 percent.<sup>56</sup> Whilst the pandemic undoubtedly had an impact on all measures with the National Student Survey (NSS), this survey is one of the most common ways to measure student satisfaction with their course generally. Whilst it is true that satisfaction with courses at Sheffield Hallam has decreased, student satisfaction with the section on Student Voice has always seen the lowest levels of respondents agreeing. For example, in 2018, 86 percent of respondents to the NSS were generally satisfied with their course, compared to 72 percent aggregated from the Student Voice section. As Table 1 indicates, those agreeing with these questions has decreased. Looking at question 25 from the 2022 NSS results (i.e. *It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on*), less than half of respondents agree with this statement.

Table 1: The percentage of respondents that agree (strongly agree and agree) to each question for the past 5 years from Student Voice section from the National Student Survey (NSS) at Sheffield Hallam University.

NSS Question	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
23. I have had the right opportunities to provide feedback on my course.	86%	89%	88%	80%	77%
24. Staff value students' views and opinions about the course.	79%	81%	78%	66%	67%
25. It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on.	66%	68%	61%	47%	46%

In 2020/21, the Students' Union introduced paid Department Representatives (Reps). Whilst Department Reps were part of academic representation for some time at Sheffield Hallam, paid Department Reps means that students in these roles are compensated for their time and contributions appropriately. This also shows that Department Reps, and the voices of students that they represent, are beginning to be embedded into more university meetings and projects, allowing the student voice to come through.

Based on our review of Department Reps, nearly all the Department Reps that applied for and were appointed did so because of their desire to improve students' experiences. Whilst some came to the role from a positive perspective – wanting to raise the student voice – others came to the role because they had experienced issues on their course and did not want other students to experience the same. Despite their efforts, Department Reps struggled to engage with and speak to many of the Course Reps in their Department. In an ideal scenario, Course Reps would gather feedback from students, share with their Department Reps, and Department Reps would escalate to College Officers, where needed. Department Reps also shared that though some Course Reps might have engaged regularly at the start of their voluntary role, their involvement dropped as the academic year continued.

Furthermore, our annual Course Rep Survey found that the percentages of respondents that agreed they felt their opinions and input were respected, listened to, or acted upon has declined in the last academic year. Generally, across all five years, the percentages of Course Reps that felt their input

<sup>56</sup> Office for Students (OfS). National Student Survey – NSS. NSS data: Provider level. Accessed on 13 May 2022 via <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/student-information-and-data/national-student-survey-nss/nss-data-provider-level>.

and opinions were acted upon was around two-thirds (see Table 2). There were a small number of comments from Course Reps that mentioned staff were not open to student comments about the course. As one Course Rep shared:

*“It often felt like we were being pushed back against by higher ups despite just informing them of other people’s opinions They kept acting like it was our opinion that we were sharing and explaining why we were wrong. That’s great and good to know, but it felt condescending and rather rejecting.”*

Table 2: Percentage of respondents that indicated strongly agree or agree. Five-year trend analysis from annual Course Rep Survey.

Question	Statement	2018 (n=227)	2019 (n=245)	2020 (n=294)	2021 (n=203)	2022 (n=170)
"I feel my opinions and input were..."	..respected."	89%	89%	92%	93%	88%
	..listened to."	86%	88%	90%	91%	88%
	..acted upon."	65%	66%	66%	68%	67%

Although the majority of Department Reps had a positive experience engaging with University staff, there were 3 who had encountered issues with staff understanding of their role. For these Department Reps, they felt that University staff misunderstood the aims of the Department Rep role and new staff were not fully briefed on how the role is integrated within the university context. As part of the Department Rep review, university staff that work alongside and with Department Reps shared their views of how embedded and accepted the Department Rep roles were amongst colleagues. As Figure 7 indicates, of the 23 respondents to the staff questionnaire, 10 responded either neutrally or negatively to the question regarding staff buy-in and acceptance of the Department Reps in their Department.

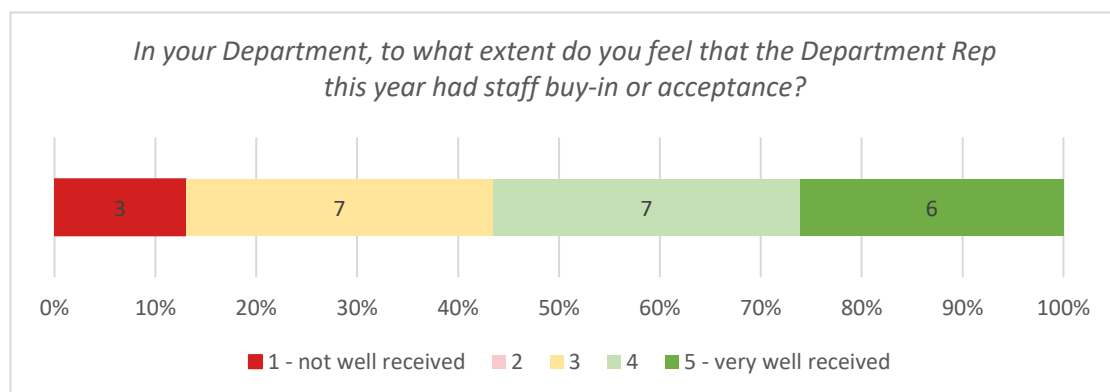


Figure 7: Extent of staff acceptance or buy-in of Department Reps in 2021/22 academic year (n=23).

When asked to provide a reason for their response, staff felt that neither they nor others were in regular contact with their Department Rep. This mirrors comments from the interviews with Department Reps. For student feedback to be properly addressed, the communication, promotion, and embedding of Department Rep roles would enable clearer understanding of issues that students are facing across the Department, as well as ensure that both staff and students are able to work together, collectively.

**Recommendation 16: The Students' Union and the University communicate and promote the Department Rep roles, including their remit and their positionality in the representation system, with academic staff of all levels.**

Furthermore, the responsibility of student voice activity does not fall solely to the Students' Union. At its core, the Students' Union's role is to promote the general interests of, and serve as a representative body, for its members.<sup>57</sup> For universities, and certainly Sheffield Hallam, the Office for Students' public interest governing principles requires all registered institutions to provide opportunities for student engagement whereby *"all students have opportunities to engage with the governance of the provider, and that this allows for a range of perspectives to have influence."*<sup>58</sup> This means that any institution registered with the Office for Students must provide and actively engage students with these governance structures. Working in partnership with the Students' Union to provide these opportunities means that students that take part tend to be voted in (as is the case for Elected Officer positions), through paid opportunities (as is the case for Department Reps or other student staff positions), or are voluntary (as is the case for Course Reps or other elected, unpaid roles). Involving the Students' Union, as the Office for Students<sup>59</sup> states, is good practice that enables an effective way for students to participate with these processes, particularly for those from harder to reach groups of students.

As our 'Hallam, How Are We Doing?' survey found, higher levels of neutrality with regards to the Students' Union's ability to create change, make things happen, or effectively represent students' views could indicate that students are unsure of some of the work of the Students' Union (see Figure 8). Similarly, the NSS results for the Students' Union (i.e., The students' union effectively represents students' academic interests) regularly has high levels of student neutrality or students indicating 'not applicable' for this question.

Considering how students normally find out about opportunities - through their course - this means that the success of the Students' Union is incumbent on staff awareness, acceptance, and promotion. Particularly now, as student attention is sought after by many, if the Students' Union and the University want to establish a regular forum for students to get involved in, feed through, and collectively improve the university environment, partnership working should be prioritised. Although there is a lack of previous research on Students' Union's generally, fostering a culture of appreciation for unions means that student-led activities work well for the institution. As Day & Dickinson state, students are comfortable with difference and diversity, they are *"permanently curious, highly creative, and unfailingly honest and direct with their feedback."*<sup>60</sup> Students in representative roles have, and will continue to, ask why something does or has happened, pushing organisations to be self-reflective and grow. The Students' Union provides opportunities for student interests (i.e., through societies, events, volunteering) which enables students to come together as a community and flourish (something uniquely lacking in the past academic year); however, the

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<sup>57</sup> Education Act 1994. Accessed on 19 May 2022 via <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1994/30/contents>.

<sup>58</sup> Office for Students (3 February 2022). Registration with the OfS: public interest governance principles. Accessed on 19 May 2022 via <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/regulation/registration-with-the-ofs-a-guide/public-interest-governance-principles>.

<sup>59</sup> Office for Students (27 July 2020). Student engagement and consultation. Accessed on 19 May 2022 via <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/effective-practice/student-engagement-and-consultation>.

<sup>60</sup> Day, M., & Dickinson, J. (2018). David versus goliath: The past, present, and future of students' unions in the UK. Oxford: Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI). doi:978-1-908240-43-9. Accessed on 19 May 2022 via <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/HEPI-Students-Unions-Report-111-FINAL-EMBARGOED1-1.pdf>.

Students' Union is also the space for intellectual growth and debate. Investment in the Students' Union, monetarily or otherwise, from their university has a knock-on impact of the success of their students and the institution. Investing in the Students' Union is investment in our student body. Sheffield Hallam University already invests monetarily into its Students' Union, but the crucial and, arguably, most important aspect of partnership working is seeing value in, engaging with, and promoting the Students' Union.

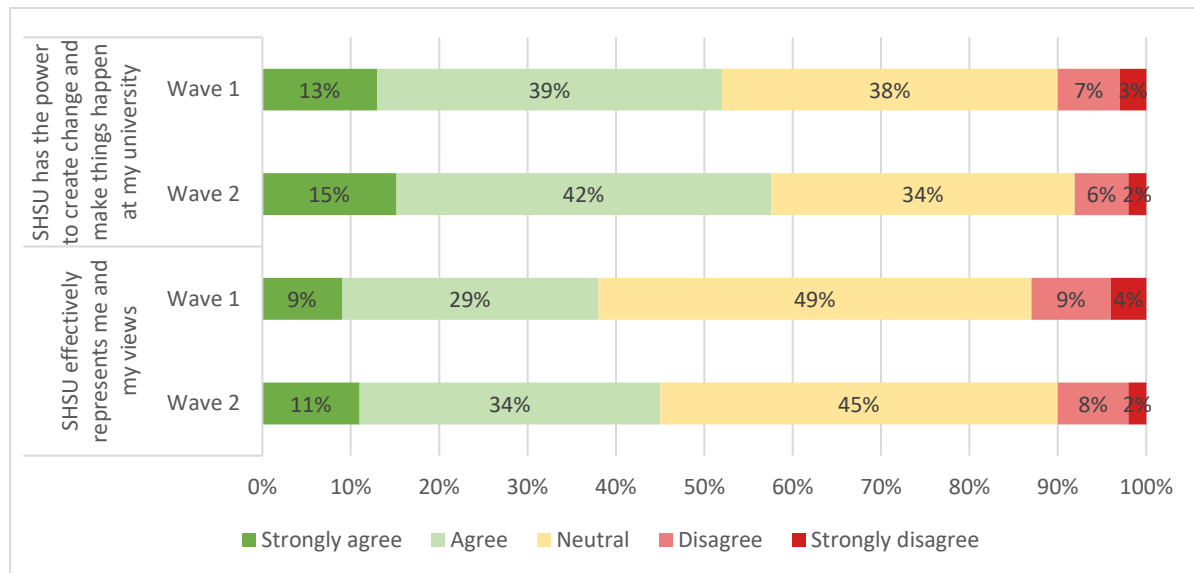


Figure 8: Differences between survey periods (wave 1 - November 2020 and wave 2 - March 2022), from 'Hallam, How Are We Doing?' Survey, of all respondents.

Furthermore, informal and anecdotal conversations with staff indicate that awareness of the Students' Union's offer, the breadth and depth of it, is limited at Sheffield Hallam. There might be some university staff that see the Students' Union as complete opposition – pushing against proven pedagogical devices and forcing through change based solely on what students' want. There might also be staff that are indifferent to the role of the Students' Union and see no advantage or disadvantage to students being involved. But the Students' Union is an ally to all staff. This is particularly the case for academic members of staff who are already stretched for time without the additional inputs from students pressing for massive upheavals. Not every change needs to be big; there is, too, a role for minor changes and quick wins. As discussed above, not every concern needs to be escalated to Department Reps and College Officers; there are small problems which can be amended quickly or, if change is not possible, can be explained in a sympathetic and reasonable way to students. Students will always push organisations to grow. Embracing innovation and change has always been woven into the university.

As a Students' Union, we are demonstrating commitment to listening and responding to students through 'Union Voice'; this digital system allows students to share their experience – good or bad – with the Students' Union to ensure they are listened to and followed through. As is discussed in Section 1 regarding Nursing & Midwifery students, this allows us to track trending topics across student feedback, to ensure that this is collated as and when issues arise, and to work in partnership to ensure a resolution is found.

**Recommendation 17: The University to work with the Students' Union to better promote the Union's services and offers to ensure all staff and students are aware of how and why getting involved with the Students' Union is important.**

## Appendix A: Research & Data Sources

Throughout the 2021/22 academic year, the Students' Union conducts primary research to understand our students' experiences. Below is a list of research projects and data sources referenced in this report that were conducted by Sheffield Hallam Students' Union, including the research methodology and the number of participants or respondents.

Source	No. of responses / participants	Methodology
<p><b>Hallam, How Are We Doing?' Survey</b></p> <p>This pulse survey took place three times in the academic year: November 2021, March 2022, and May 2022. The survey asked student opinions about the university, the Students' Union, and their experiences with both, as well as tailored questions for each time of year.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nov 2021: 3365</li> <li>• March 2022: 1368</li> <li>• May 2022: 1356</li> </ul>	Quantitative
<p><b>Union Voice</b></p> <p>This is a new digital system where students can share feedback about their course-related concerns with the Students' Union to enable the Union to gather feedback and fix issues, where applicable.</p>	193	Quantitative
<p><b>Expectations Vs Reality: A Student-Centred Exploration of Feedback Pedagogy</b></p> <p>Focus groups with targeted groups of students, by College and Department determined by previous NSS results, looked at student expectations and realities of feedback received on assessment group. <i>Converis ID ER38822376</i>.</p>	16	Qualitative
<p><b>Period Poverty Survey</b></p> <p>This short questionnaire was circulated by the Students' Union's Rights &amp; Campaigns Team with an aim to understand student needs surrounding menstruation products on campus.</p>	201	Quantitative
<p><b>Breakfast Club</b></p> <p>These informal focus groups took place at various points in the academic year; participants were asked to share thoughts on how the Students' Union and/or the University can raise awareness of and promote support services.</p>	7	Qualitative

Source	No. of responses / participants	Methodology
<p><b>Reconceptualising Transition into Higher Education: Pandemic 'Belonging' in The University</b></p> <p>This longitudinal project tracked students' experiences, expectations, and belonging as first-year students at Sheffield Hallam University. The aim of this project was to understand what it is like being a student at Hallam transitioning from secondary into tertiary education, particularly during and moving out of a global pandemic. <i>Converis ID ER36585392.</i></p>	12	Qualitative
<p><b>International Students' Housing Survey</b></p> <p>This short questionnaire was sent to all international students to gather feedback on how they found and acquired accommodation in the UK.</p>	129	Quantitative
<p><b>Lived experience: barriers to academic achievement and perceptions of BAME targeted campaigns</b></p> <p>This survey was created and led by our BAME Ambassador. The survey aimed to explore student perceptions of diversity, inclusion, and the BAME awarding gap at Sheffield Hallam. <i>Converis ID ER41647682.</i></p>	391	Mixed Methods
<p><b>Department Rep Feedback</b></p> <p>This feedback is collected from Department Reps (via a combination of opinions from students and Course Reps) monthly.</p>	17	Qualitative
<p><b>Course Rep Survey 2022</b></p> <p>This annual survey asks Course Reps to share how they found their experience of being a Course Rep.</p>	170	Quantitative

## Appendix B: Progress from 2020/21 Recommendations

Below are the responses and progress made on recommendations made in the 2020/21 Student Voice Report.

Recommendation	Responsibility		Response	Progress
	SHU	SHSU		
The University to continue to review and monitor students' digital needs, in line with future planning regarding blended learning, and to continue to provide support for students with the highest needs.	●		The University outlined four areas for service improvement and have continued to supply required hardware and software for teaching delivery. Additional IT support has been added so requests can be resolved swiftly. Part of this includes improving help and guidance available to students and considered the direct engagement that Digital Technology Services (DTS) has with students.	Completed
The University and the Students' Union enter into an improved data sharing agreement that will allow for joint understanding and sharing of relevant research and insight information.	●	●	The University and the Students' Union have a new data sharing agreement that will enable sharing of personal data to enhance service delivery and research on students' experiences. University staff now have direct access to Student Rep information via the Students' Union's website.	Completed
The University to review what has worked this academic year, in line with student opinion, to make informed decisions about delivery for any future blended learning.	●		The University have established a monthly bulletin included in the Academic Digest. This bulletin includes research from across the institution. This research has been used to inform future delivery via Spaces & Places Survey, Digital Day in the Life, Student Researchers, and Student Panel. The University have also created the Student Voice Repository, collating student voice insights from a variety of sources.	Completed
The College of Business, Technology and Engineering to build assessment support sessions into student timetables, to ensure that students are given ample opportunity to understand and ask questions.	●		The College of BTE provide announcements for students via Blackboard when sample papers are available and when there will be further module briefings and support available for exams/ phase tests/ ICTA. There has been enhanced assessment support put in place for Engineering & Maths students.	Completed



Recommendation	Responsibility		Response	Progress
	SHU	SHSU		
The College of Health, Wellbeing and Life Sciences to improve process and communication of placement allocation in Health and Social Care, and to broaden placement opportunities for the Academy of Sport and Physical Activity and the Department of Biosciences and Chemistry.	●		The College of HWLS have coordinated action by placement leads with students; placement staff have improved communication for all placement students and provided drop-in support sessions for Nursing & Midwifery students specifically. The College have also introduced sandwich placements for Sport students. Recommendation 3 refers to the work that needs to continue for Nursing & Midwifery students in this College. Sport have introduced sandwich placements for the first time this year. Employability Consultants delivered a staff briefing to bring awareness and understanding for sandwich placements. Biosciences & Chemistry has also been running sandwich placements for some time and engagement continues to be high.	Ongoing
The College of Social Sciences and Arts to review and reflect on the impact COVID19 has had on access to learning materials, equipment, and/or learning spaces, and to take lessons from this in terms of student experience going forwards.	●		The College of SSA have provided alternative, creative activities to enable students to learn online with the necessary equipment, resources, and materials. The College has learnt from previous academic years, and this will be carried forward into future practice for accessibility and alternative assessments.	Completed
The University and the Students' Union to work together to provide targeted mental wellbeing initiatives to enhance LGBTQ+ student mental health.	●	●	All students can access up to six therapeutic and practical support sessions through Student Wellbeing. Students have the option of indicating a preference to see a support adviser who identifies as LGBTQ+. The Students' Union and the University have also produced an LGBTQIA Identity at University video focussing on managing periods of transition from an LGBTQ+ perspective.	Completed

Recommendation	Responsibility		Response	Progress
	SHU	SHSU		
The University to ensure that, at a course level, students are provided opportunities to collaborate, whilst future learning allocates this for sense of community to build.	●		The University's Hallam Model encourages collaboration in course curriculum and course improvement plans. Building strong student communities is an area of focus for the University; some of this work in taking place via development of academic societies with the Students' Union and creating more of a campus community. The University have also consulted students to shape and promote initiatives more effectively.	Ongoing
The University and the Students' Union to work together, during Welcome Back Week and beyond, to re-introduce and publicise the Hallam support offer to ensure that students are always aware of and know how to access support should they need it.	●	●	The University's Welcome Week Project Team worked closely with the Students' Union to deliver a schedule of support activities and events during the Welcome Weeks and in-year. Some of this includes introduction to Hallam via Your Hallam Welcome Module; sessions with Disabled Student Support, Library, Careers, and Wellbeing; bookable campus tours; variety of fairs for extracurricular; academic adviser group sessions; and College Support Triangle with Course Reps. The Students' Union regularly signpost to university support pages, working with the University's Central Communications Team.	Completed
The University to ensure that students are provided with information about ways to look after their wellbeing directly from academic staff that they are in regular contact with.	●		Academic Advisers are provided for all students and during first group sessions staff include '5 Ways To Wellbeing'. Advisers have a page on the Student Support Triangle SharePoint site and includes wellbeing and motivation information for academic staff to be able to send to students as required. The University also provides weekly student wellbeing workshops and the 'Togetherall' support community is available instantly for students all year. Academics in the Academy of Sport have led on Compassionate Pedagogy where academics take a compassionate, supportive approach to students, regardless of their role.	Completed

Recommendation	Responsibility		Response	Progress
	SHU	SHSU		
The University and the Students' Union continue to monitor student financial needs to ensure that those that need help the most are aware of hardship funding.	●	●	The University has launched a targeted bursary for current students with 1000 awards made as of April 2022. In addition, the minimum award for Hardship Funding, available to students that need it the most, has increased by 66% for the 2022/23 academic year.	Ongoing
The Students' Union to launch a University-wide campaign on student housing rights, sharing information about their rights and where to access support if they need it.		●	The Students' Union has done some work this year towards this recommendation such as additional self-help information and news articles on the website, and e-newsletters. The Students' Union ran a Housing Fair in January 2022 where students were provided with information about the Snug scheme, the Advice Centre and Student Rights Team; the teams also distributed information on finding good quality housing. The University supports the Union via Accommodation Forums and regular meetings. The Advice Centre is working on guidance for students on making complaints about their accommodation, in response to a student-initiated policy asking for this.	Ongoing
The Students' Union to continue to work on its new strategy and ambition to deliver outstanding representation, working with the University to further develop the representation system and ensure that accountable personnel are allocated within Colleges and Departments.		●	The Students' Union has been working closely with University staff throughout the 2021/22 academic year. At a senior level, the Students' Union and the University meet regularly for joined up approach to representation work. The University has provided additional funding which ensures that work is also aligned to NSS Common Priorities. Students' Union staff also meet with University staff to problem solve, share ideas, and identify shared goals as part of representation work. There continues to be a joint meeting where decisions regarding representation takes place (SRSG).	Completed