

## Students' Union Monthly Student Feedback Report

The following provides insights into the most noteworthy issues faced by Sheffield Hallam students in June 2021. This month, the report contains information from our [Advice Centre](#) and Helpdesk, as well as findings from a qualitative research project with students on top up courses (entitled '*Listening to the experiences of students on top up courses*'). This research was approved by SHU Ethics (Converis number ER31010691). Most of this report will share findings from this research project. For context, a top-up degree is an equivalent to a final year of an undergraduate study to obtain a full level 6 (bachelors) degree. As the name implies, the prospective student undertakes some additional modules at the final year level to 'top-up' an existing qualification such as Diploma, Higher National Diploma (HND) or foundation degree. All students enrolled on a top up course at Sheffield Hallam, based within Sheffield, were invited to take part in the study via email from the Students' Union (n=557). Within Colleges, the research was also promoted by Heads of Department and Course Leaders directly on Blackboard sites where a high number of students on top up courses were enrolled.

*Table 1: The source of data used throughout this report, as well as the number of queries or participants. NB: \*this is the number of new enquiries received from 2<sup>nd</sup> to 30<sup>th</sup> June 2021.*

Source	Number of queries/ responses
Advice Centre	102*
Helpdesk	108*
Number of participants ( <i>'Listening to experiences of students on top up courses'</i> )	11

### Summary of this report

- 108 enquires received by Students' Union Helpdesk, majority related to academic issues.
- 102 new enquiries received by the Advice Centre: 48 on academic issues, 34 on funding and finance, and 13 on housing.
- The experiences of students on top up courses are unique – they join a course mid-way or towards the end – and this means that they struggle to integrate into their course. Some of issues faced by these students include: lack of belonging to their course; lack of knowledge and/or understanding of what support is available to them; or struggle with feelings of academic preparedness or adapting after breaks in study.

### Monthly Statistics from the Students' Union

This month, our Helpdesk received 108 enquiries. Most of these enquires were related to a students' course and, where appropriate, some students were directed to contact their Course Leader. Others were signposted to our Advice Centre, especially where students were appealing a mark, related to misconduct, or sought advice on fee reduction. Only 1 student contacted the Helpdesk seeking information about getting out of their accommodation contract; the 5 other queries received by the Helpdesk were students seeking information about where to live. Other queries (n= 24) with the Helpdesk were from students or others wanting to know about the HUBS building opening or related to our merchandise sales in the building.

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In addition, our Advice Centre received 102 new enquiries. As noted above, some of these were received by our Helpdesk initially and signposted or sent to our Advice Centre. Overall, our Advice Centre received 48 academic related enquiries (including 14 Appeal, 14 Academic Misconduct, 8 Complaint, 7 Progression problems, and 3 Fitness to Practice), 34 Funding and finance related enquiries (including 6 about tuition fee debt, 12 about financial hardship or arrears (plus 5 specifically about the hardship fund), and 6 asking for benefit checks), and 13 Housing related enquiries (including 4 about repairs, 3 leaving contracts or contract related, and 2 council tax and 2 finding accommodation).

### Top Up Course: Background Information

There are many benefits of obtaining a top-up degree. It saves time, provides an opportunity for international students to travel and live abroad, and has the added financial benefit of allowing a student to 'top up' their current qualification to obtain a full degree, rather than starting over again. A top up degree is a fantastic way to enhance knowledge by giving the student enhanced and specific knowledge related to their field of study.<sup>1</sup> Top up courses are popular amongst international students and has become a unique selling point to 'top up' their relevant HNDs to bachelor's degree in the UK. The degree also enhances student's employment prospects, making them more attractive to current and prospective employers by obtaining necessary skills and knowledge relevant to the subject area.

Previous research has found, however, that the short duration of study, difficulties with curriculum, and the need for increased academic support means that, for some students, a top up degree is particularly difficult. At Sheffield Hallam University, enrolment data reveals that just over half of students on top up courses (n=1041) undertake these within and at international partnership institutions. At the time of recruiting for this research project, just over 800 students were enrolled at Sheffield Hallam on a top up course within the UK, with the majority of these based at Sheffield Hallam University. Although many of the students that undertake a top up course within Sheffield Hallam are from the United Kingdom, some are from international countries.

In a UK higher education context, and indeed in many other countries across the world, there is a gap to success in and progression from HE and opportunities to obtain equitable outcomes continue to remain restrictive for certain groups of students. These students might, for example, be more likely to come into higher education from various avenues (such as completing a diploma and then returning to top up to a full honour degree) for financial reasons. As the UUK and NUS (2019)<sup>2</sup> have identified, home undergraduate BAME students are more likely to come from disadvantaged areas with low socio-economic status and international students also experience acculturation challenges, culture shock, and challenges of settling down. Previous research has identified that international students require a specific set of support needs when studying outside of their home country and, indeed, in a new or second language. Therefore, for BAME or international students that do complete a top up degree, the short time duration of study and poor level of support could impact negatively on these students' experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> Clark, L. (2010). Distance Is No Barrier. *Nursing Standard (through 2013)*, 25(9), 64. Retrieved from <https://hallam.idm.oclc.org/login?url=https://www-proquest-com.hallam.idm.oclc.org/scholarly-journals/distance-is-no-barrier/docview/763597641/se-2?accountid=13827>; Prince S, (2014, Aug 01): Why you should consider a Top-up degree programme. South China morning post. Retrieved from <https://www.scmp.com/article/1564224/why-you-should-consider-top-degree-programme>; Cheng, W.O.C (2015) An examination of factors that influence Hong Kong students selection of local top-up bachelor's degree programmes. Doctoral Dissertation. *University of Newcastle*.

<sup>2</sup> Universities UK (UUK), & National Union of Students (NUS). (2019). *Black, asian and minority ethnic student attainment at UK universities: Closing the gap*. London: Universities UK; National Union of Students. Retrieved from <https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Documents/2019/bame-student-attainment-uk-universities-closing-the-gap.pdf>

The following research questions were used to formulate the focus group and interview tools:

- Do top up degree students feel a part of their course community? To what extent are they integrated into their course?
- How well have top up degree students been supported to complete their course in comparison to traditional degree students?
- Why did they choose to complete a top up degree? What are the perceived benefits? What are the perceived disadvantages?
- To what extent does ethnicity and domicile effect top up degree students feeling like they are a part of their course community or that they have been supported to complete their course?

Data was thematically analysed with main and subthemes emerging from the transcripts. Due to the recruitment process and student availability, some of this data was collected via focus groups and other through individual interviews, where necessary. The codes were collapsed into the following themes: Background (course and motivation); Experience (break in study); Belonging; Feelings; and Support.

#### Listening to experiences of students on top up courses: Findings

Participants were from the following SHU Departments: Engineering & Maths (n=3); Social Work, Social Care & Community Services (n=3); Service Sector Management (n=1); Finance, Accounting & Business Studies (n=1); and 1 participant was unknown (chose not to share their course name). Nearly all participants, but one, did a top up course within a subject area of their previous qualification. All participants undertook a top up course because of the benefits of having a level 6 qualification – **they felt they would be more prepared for a job in their chosen sector**. For international students, they shared that obtaining a degree from a UK university was seen as more prestigious than their other options.

Furthermore, **international students** struggled when they first started their top up course **due to language barriers, accents in speech, and cultural differences**. Participants from international countries also shared that they struggled to cope with the differences between UK and their home country **methods of teaching, the pace of the course, feeling academically prepared, and getting direct support from academic staff**.

Nearly all participants had taken a long break in study (between one and 10 years, though one participant had only had a month break) and, because of this, **some felt that they lacked crucial knowledge for their subject area and had difficulties adapting**. As one participant shared, a module had been covered at the previous level (Level 5) but was not available for them at their Level 6 top up. Despite this, all the participants felt that they had relevant work experience to bring to their course and that this gave them an advantage over other students.

A significant finding of this research project was feelings of belonging within their course. This was a shared experience for many participants – they **struggled to bond with their course mates because of the connections that students had already formed**. This made group work more difficult. Participants also expressed that they struggled to fit in and felt odd after returning to pursue their degree after their break in study.

*“I had challenges in terms of relating with a lot of people. I am a friendly person, but these guys have been together. They have got this bond and they'd been together right from the onset, so it was difficult to get into the clique.”*

Within the context of the Coronavirus pandemic, this meant that they did not recognise many of their course mates. In addition, participants that were mature shared an amplified feeling of lack of belonging and unable to relate to their younger course mates. For one international student, though

they had come over to the UK to study for their top up course, they had never come to the University campus.

*“kind of just isolated, also don't have friends and family here. It's horrible”*

Finally, for most the participants, the lack of support they received from the university left them feeling confused, stressed, and frustrated. They also shared that **no one asked them what support they might need, and they had to chase around for it**, thereby being passed around until time went by. They could not get the right support and were expected to know everything. One participant shared that they received email was received with different support available to them, but the number of links and information left them confused. For this group of students, **joining a course mid-way through completion, means that they might not receive the same level of support that foundation or first-year students might traditionally**. Our research indicates that they were encouraged to ask for help when they needed it, rather than receiving direct help from academic staff at the onset.

Despite this, there was some positive feedback. Some shared that their Academic Advisers and library support was helpful. One participant, who was an international student, received help from their Department and their Student Support Advisor, and was able to get a laptop to help with studies. Some participants made comments that support staff were generally nice and welcoming. Furthermore, one participant said they felt lucky to have a close relationship and one to one support with their course leader. Reflecting on this, they felt they would be helpless if they did not have the close relationship with their course leader.

#### Listening to experiences of students on top up courses: Recommendations

Throughout the focus groups and interviews, participants made several recommendations that they though should be considered by the University and the Students' Union going forward.

1. **The University to restructure the length of top up courses.** Participants felt that the programme needs restructuring because the seven to twelve months, which is the normal length of courses that these participants were on, is not enough. This was especially the case for international students, who have to adapt to the UK learning style, teaching style, accommodation, English language barriers, amongst others.
2. **The University to create a special course or programme for top up courses.** Participants also felt that the course should be a special programme or class, especially since being paired with final year, full or part time students who have been accustomed to the system. Again, for international top up students, some of whom have had long gaps in study, this would help them to cope with course work, to help make friends on their course, and to get direct support from academic staff. As suggested above, participants felt that their fellow course mates (full or part time undergraduate students) have already moved at a faster pace.
3. **Academic staff to provide additional support sessions within their course just for top up students.** participants suggested extra sessions or classes occasionally where they can ask questions, especially for students that are struggling more to adjust. Furthermore, international top-up students also suggested that dissertations be adjusted and that, when creating assessments, the time constraints of their course as well as challenges adjusting to the course be considered. In this instance, Academic Advisors might have a crucial role in ensuring that these students are provided with extra help, especially upon transiting into their course and back to university level study.
4. **The Students' Union to provide direct communications about what support is available to them, or top provide an opportunity for top up students to come together to support one another.** As this research has found, participants identified their difficulty with knowing what support is available to them when they need it and felt disconnected from their course

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mates. This might be an opportunity for the Students' Union to further communicate services available for these students, understanding their unique position within the University as an undergraduate student, or to provide space for these students to come together to support one another.

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