**Whose Flexibility? Aggregated responses from key informants - phases 1 and 2.**

**Headline messages**

* There is less flexibility generally at undergraduate than postgraduate level.
* There is minimal flexibility in relation to choice of assessment methods and mode(s). Where there is flexibility, it tends to be at postgraduate level.
* There is some flexibility in terms of students having epistemological control over studies. There is a perception that this is more likely to occur at postgraduate level and on work-based learning courses.
* There is deemed to be reasonable flexibility in terms of choices concerning interruption of studies, recognition of prior credit and acquisition of credit if leaving midway through courses and ability to switch studies.
* The range of flexibility is highly dependent on the University’s quality infrastructure and resourcing levels along with the approach of delivery staff. The latter is related strongly to individual interpretations of flexibility.
* The range of flexibility is highly dependent upon external drivers such as professional body regulations and sector requirements which clearly influence extent of flexibility. There is deemed to be some opportunities for students to amend the contents of their courses where this is permitted.
* Very few respondents addressed the question about Barnett’s framework in sufficient detail although one person expressed strong doubts about the clarity of some of the questions.
* There is variability related to perceived levels of risk when considering flexible learning approaches. Several respondents cautioned against adopting too much flexibility for fear of damaging quality.
* These snapshot headlines were gleaned from an overall response rate of 72.5% of those surveyed (actual n. 29 from a possible 40). The sample comprised students, academics and professional services staff.

**Analyses of specific questions**

**Q1 Does Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) enable its students to receive credit of some kind for their *prior learning and/or experience?* (So requiring flexibility in the making of admissions’ judgements)**

28 R - 1 NR

Varied responses but all respondents acknowledged that there was an awareness of APEL systems. Three respondents felt that there were systemic issues concerning how students are encouraged to engage with the process and two used the terms rigid and inflexible in their respective definitions. Generally gaining recognition for experience was felt to be more difficult and often claims were dealt with on a case-by-case basis at admission tutors 'discretion'. One respondent stated that there was *not a significant level of activity* and that the university needed *more variegated pathways to facilitate transition to credit rated studies.*

**Q2 Can students vary and even *switch disciplines and/or professional fields* during the course of their studies at SHU?**

28 R - 1 NR

Most respondents felt that students could switch studies but that this was probably easier at PG level. Six respondents didn't know what was possible whilst a further two didn’t know directly but anticipated it was possible. Another two didn’t think it was possible at all. Challenges were expressed more in terms of pragmatic concerns - such as capacity, contracts and commissions - rather than pedagogic reasons.

**Q3 Do students have some optionality over the *pattern of their studies*? (For example, some students may wish to have physical access to the library during the night; others may wish to have digital access to pedagogical resources associated with their programme of study)**

28 R - 1 NR

All respondents felt that students had some scope for influencing pattern of studies; however, this was linked principally to online learning and having effective access although one respondent noted that programmes of study are built with *clients at the centre so our programme LTA strategy aligns to what the client requires*. One respondent suggested that there was still more to do *to help personalise the learning journey.* Attendance requirements on some courses were seen as mediating issues.

**Q4 Do students have a degree of choice over the *modalities* in which they present their assignments? (For example, in combinations of text, sound and vision, in three-dimensionality or in performance)**

28 R - 1 NR

This was seen as rare and not normal practice. The majority of respondents indicated that there was little or no choice at programme level over assessment modes; however, several cited flexibility in individual modules as offering some choice. One respondent claimed that this aspect was *severely limited by the imagination/creativity of the course and module leaders, and of the students themselves. I rarely see a push beyond conventional methods, which once set, tend to become entrenched* but that this was an improving position but hampered by resourcing pressures which *often constrain creative assessment method decisions.* One respondent claimed that within a work-based learning context, there was more pushing at assessment boundaries. One respondent claimed that the University still operates from a position of ‘assessment of learning' rather than 'assessment for learning'.

**Q5 Do SHU students have some *epistemological control* over their programme of studies? (For example, some students prefer to study theoretical aspects of phenomena; others prefer to study practical aspects)**

27 R - 2 NR

There was a mixed set of responses to this question; several respondents felt options were constrained due to the nature of the subject studied and due to working directly with PSRBs and commissioners. One respondent indicated that the 'control lies with the lecturer' with little negotiation of the mainstream curriculum. Another suggested that they perceived there was less choice at undergraduate level. However, one respondent indicated that this was an area of strength for the University but felt that *the onus is on theory / academic over practical. For example some placements for professional courses are graded on assignment not practical achievement during placement.* One respondent indicated that control could be viewed as synonymous with choice, being linked primarily with assessment choices *where so long as criteria are met, preferences can be foregrounded*.

**Q6 Are students enabled to adopt a *learning strategy* best suited to their own learning style? (For example, whether starting with concrete instances or discrete facts warranting a surface-level approach but broadening into a deep and synoptic understanding or starting with a deep grasp of general principles and filling in the interstices over time)**

26 R - 3 NR

There was a perception that this is heavily dependent upon the delivery staff. Nine respondents felt that students were enabled to develop their own learning approaches. One respondent indicated that *we all developed our own learning styles within the group with encouragement from lecturers.* Another respondent expressed doubt that this could happen effectively: *I have certainly witnessed attempts to show, enthuse and empower students to be reflective of their own strategies and take control, but this is always ultimately in their hands.* One respondent felt this facet wasn’t accommodated very well whilst two further respondents indicated that there was no flexibility about giving students the opportunity to adopt more individualised approaches to learning strategy development. One respondent felt that the VLE had a role to play in setting the scene for examining learning approaches whilst another indicated that - at PG level - there is little time to articulate such notions with students. One respondent suggested that much of this work is front-loaded when developing courses.

**Q7 Do students have choice as to the *level of interactivity* of their own approach to their studies? (For example, some students thrive on interaction with others; other students much prefer, at least initially, to work things out in their own way)**

27 R - 2 NR

A range of responses but general consensus was that there is opportunity for students, per se, to determine their levels of interactivity although deemed more feasible at PG level than at UG where *the sheer size of the modules dissuades tutors from offering variety*. One respondent stated that interactivity was built into course leadership and course design in which *we certainly attempt to 'design in' opportunities and formats that cater to all learning styles and levels of interactivity*. The majority felt that this aspect was dependent on the nature of the course, with professional programmes being more proscribed although there appeared to be an emphasis on mature students being thought able to direct this process more effectively. One respondent commented that *they do have a choice, though that is not to say it is necessarily encouraged*. It was noted that choice about interactivity appears to be linked strongly to the vicissitudes of the tutor.

**Q8 Can SHU students change the *mode of their registration*? (For example, as between full-time and part-time study)**

27 R - 2 NR

Over one third of respondents felt that there was some flexibility concerning moving between FT and PT but this was easier at PG level of study and several felt this was highly dependent on the type of course and may be restricted. For example, one person thought it may be restricted if involving international students. One cited that the most obvious time that a change in mode of registration could occur was when a disabled student was not coping with FT study and could then move to PT mode. One person thought there was no movement between modes of delivery with eight more respondents being unsure whether this was possible, with several commenting that - in principle - there should be few reasons why students cannot change their mode of study.

**Q9 Can students *interrupt* their studies at SHU?**

28 R - 1 NR

All - bar one respondent - thought that students could interrupt their studies in accordance with SHU guidance. Three respondents mentioned that this was subject to the timed-out rule. Another respondent felt that this applied principally to part-time students *both within stages owing to personal circumstances and between stages, although this can incur fee increases*. There was also a suggestion that this was more problematic for international students due to visa restrictions.

**Q10 Are students allowed to *acquire credits* and be able to leave midway with a portfolio of credits?**

28 R - 1 NR

Most respondents acknowledged that this was possible particularly in PG or CPD type studies. Several respondents mentioned encouraging students to work towards named stages or awards within programmes. However, one respondent felt that leaving midway with credits was not possible *unless topping up - for example if a diploma had been completed and the student has progressed to degree level then if the student left they would have credits from diploma.* One respondent felt that delivery length of modules could be a mediating variable.

**Q11 Does SHU provide for students to choose or to *influence* the way – and potentially time and frequency – in which they will be *assessed*?**

28 R - 1 NR

Many respondents suggested that students do not have any choices over timing and frequency of assessment - only two felt it was permissible. PG was seen to be an area where this was more likely. One respondent felt that this was due to *being governed by QAA guidelines and think sometimes we are not flexible enough. Other institutions are much more flexible than SHU, i.e. Chester, Middlesex*. Some specific modules were mentioned as having scope to allow for more choice concerning timing of assessments, whilst one respondent claimed that although students were able to comment on every module undertaken - including assessment mechanisms - *it is often the case that "you don't know what you don't know" - assessment innovation is more likely triggered by the uni. We do try and offer flexibility of hand-in for our particular (mature, working) student demographic but this can go too far and is also being increasingly constrained*. A further two respondents didn't know.

**12. Does the University allow students to alter the *contents* of their programme so as to heighten their professional or personal relevance? (Which might even allow students room to switch their main subject of study completely)**

27 R - 2 NR

There was a varied set response to this question. Some felt that this was determined by the nature of the programme and whether there were strictures on amending content due to professional body interests or external accreditation. A framework approach was viewed as a possible way of doing so by one respondent. Some thought it more possible on postgraduate courses and on work-based learning courses and other closed courses which *provide opportunity to flex the focus upon relevant aspects of work*. Five respondents were unsure whilst a further seven thought that altering contents was not feasible in any situation. One respondent noted that *this can be done but is not widespread.*

**13. Do you have any other comments about the twelve questions set to audit present institutional flexibility or about the Flexible Learning SEP in general?**

21 R - 8 NR

Several respondents had no further comments to make. Two respondents suggested that professional body requirements and level of study were mediating factors. One respondent noted that the institution needs to recognise that *the key determinant of flexibility are the quality regulations and processes that can act to stifle but are an essential part of any university; flexibility can be attained through flex of the rules and process on a course by course basis but that challenges university wide process and structure and generates resistance.* This point was corroborated by a respondent who claimed that *SHU processes, academic calendars and resourcing models are not set up to facilitate flexible learning.* Only one respondent commented upon the quality of Barnett’s questions, indicating that they were bordering upon inaccessible language at times. One comment indicated that too much flexibility could damage academic rigour. Another felt that many of the issues raised were WBL matters and should be incorporated within that rubric. Another respondent indicated that teaching style adopted by tutor is crucial in addressing flexibility.

**14. Please provide details here of up to three further key informants with interest or expertise in flexible learning**

13R - 16NR

Several names offered with some duplicated by multiple sources.