**Student Case Study – University of Tungsten**

*It is resolute, research-intensive, caters for its known student demographic and embodies traditional approaches to higher education.*

**My Student Experience**

I joined my university because it has an excellent reputation as a top-class university and I like the fact that you know what you are doing from Day One. I came straight in due to my A level grades and most of my year are just like me, which is reassuring, as we have lots in common which I find really helpful. Some of my friends at other universities have switched discipline during their studies but that wouldn’t be allowed here as you are expected to have a passion for your academic area and stick to it. The tutors here are all active researchers who have built their expertise from years of study so they are recognised as true knowledge leaders in their field.

All in my year are full-time students – you really wouldn’t have chance of doing anything else – as the study demands don’t give you much time beyond preparing for your next tutorial. I don’t mind that at all as at least I know what the assessments are – usually in-depth essays that I have to defend – but I do like the fact that we get to determine our own responses. Nobody gets model answers here; indeed, nobody would want them! This approach allows me to develop my own approach to the learning, most of which is library-based during each term with weekly follow-up small group tutorials. My subject area is highly competitive so you are expected to work individually for the majority of time but you do get chance to work together in small groups with your tutor, sometimes on an area of their research - which is most exciting – so there is some form of collaboration. It depends primarily on the tutor leading the study area.

I had one friend who got ill during term and who was allowed to interrupt their studies but I feel that that should be the exception rather than the norm as you get on a roll with your subject area and it would be a real shame to stop the momentum you develop between self, tutor and other students. A friend at another university was told that they could exit with an intermediate award but here you have to be in it for the duration or you leave with nothing (very few do). I agree with this approach as all students struggle to master their knowledge bases and I’m not sure it would be helpful to stop for any reason other than near death! I have another friend who has even altered the contents of their studies but that would never be permitted here as University of Tungsten has such high standards, which is why I am so proud to study here in a university that continues to uphold academic traditions.

**Student Case Study – University of Graphene**

*It takes flexibility to a new level, emphasising a ‘from cradle to grave’ approach. As a totally learning-focussed university, it has dispersed and virtual campuses delivering higher education 24-7.*

**My Student Experience**

I joined my university when I was in primary school due to its affiliated schools’ scheme so I always knew that I had a University place from being five years old, which was very reassuring. What I really like the most is that the other students I work with can be from any age or background so that you learn much from their contrasting experiences as one big community of learners. We don’t have years of study separated by undergraduate and postgraduate such as in some other universities. I am in Year 16 of study - as University of Graphene takes a lifelong learning approach from primary level – and others keep going for upwards of fifty years. At present, my Year 16 study is in the Liberal Arts area but next year I might try Science. The tutors here are more like facilitators of learning. They are real experts but in learning approaches rather than in specific knowledge bases.

My ‘year’ group is very fluid as it is made up of some people who just drop in to access a particular topic, others study for a whole year like me, and others who come from work or attend our sessions at weekend or online. Sometimes students mix and match their studies like this the whole way through. You never know who is going to appear at sessions, be it in person, online, at a workplace study hub or asynchronously, but that is part of the challenge and has helped me to build really good communication skills and become adept in a range of social media sources. I map out my learning aims for the whole year, subject these to peer scrutiny and sign off, and then I negotiate the kinds of assessment I might like to follow with my personal facilitator. I like the fact that I can tailor my learning as an individual or can even co-design more bespoke curriculum with peers and facilitators as part of a wider learning community.

I know that in other universities some students are not allowed to slow down the pace of their studies or escalate matters. This feels very strange to me as there are very few restrictions here. You sign up to the University of Graphene for life and negotiate your needs accordingly. There are threshold standards which have to be met but these feel more like supportive gateways than barriers to progress. This university prides itself on the learning process, so knowledge acquisition becomes far less important than what you actually do with it. The most popular area of exploration is Transdisciplinary Studies, in which you work on a variety of concepts and issues with a host of collaborators, justifying a process for reaching each threshold level, in which approaches to collaborative learning, types of knowledge base requirements and perceived learning benefits for self and wider community have to be agreed and demonstrated. I have always belonged to the University of Graphene yet it still makes learning exciting!

**Student Case Study – University of Haluminium**

*It is reasonably flexible, learning-focussed and responsive to its wider community and proud to be industry-oriented.*

**My Student Experience**

I joined my university as it offered me a chance to recognise my previous experience and make it count against some of the entry criteria. I came to Haluminium as a ‘mature student’ and I managed to fit in quite well with my course cohort. Many are younger than me but as we are studying for a professional award, my experience and workplace application are valued. When I started here, I wasn’t too sure that I had chosen the right pathway but I did feel reassured that if I wanted to make a change in Year One, it might be permissible at an early stage. Happily, that wasn’t needed and the tutors here have been excellent in supporting my professional ambitions, especially as they all bring such a wealth of work-related experience as recognised experts in their field.

All of my year group happen to be full-time students but you can navigate a part-time route through the course, provided that the modules run at the right times. I really like the fact that at the start of the course, we get assessment briefs for the whole of the academic year, with clearly detailed guidance on how to meet the learning outcomes and help with structure. This year it has resulted in a mix of assessment types, involving essays, presentations and workplace projects. As the course progresses, there will be much more emphasis placed on developing relevant workplace skills acquisition. Some tutors allow you to work in groups for assignments, which I quite like as you gain other perspectives but generally the assessed work is done individually. In a later year, there will be the opportunity to do some independent supervised study in an area of professional specialism so I am really looking forward to that challenge.

Several of my year group have had outside pressures which have either resulted in them having to suspend their studies or leave. One of the best things about my university is the potential to interrupt your studies should something unforeseen occur or to be able to leave with something more than just a set of modules. One of my friends on another course at Haluminium will be re-joining in the next academic year having had a year’s break and on my course, a few students have exited with step off awards such as at Certificate or Diploma stage. I have also heard that on some non-professional courses, some students are allowed to negotiate course content with some tutors and even to use peer review as a recognised form of assessment although I gather this is only for work in progress rather than for final summative marks that lead to course grades and overall degree classification. University of Haluminium is a welcoming place with a very supportive infrastructure for those who need it and it has a great reputation for delivering employable graduates. I hope to become one of those valued professionals!

**Student Case Study – University of Platinum**

*Marginally more resolute than flexible, it recognises that research and learning are interconnected and wishes to engage a wider student demographic.*

**My Student Experience**

I joined my university through gaining a highly-prized scholarship route for widening participation (WP) students and feel very privileged to be at University of Platinum which is recognised as one of the leading institutes for research-informed teaching. I am studying for one of the more academic disciplines although we do have some established professional routes. As part of the evolving offer at Platinum, all students are compelled to do an interdisciplinary enquiry project in Year Two and I hope to be able to align mine with a particular research project of one of my tutors. I am studying full-time although the university has recently introduced some new flexible routes for courses in some areas, in alignment with its stated values of encouraging a more diverse student population and to address under-represented groups. The tutors here are very supportive and I have even been offered the opportunity to undertake some teaching duties, guided by their training scheme for brighter scholars from WP backgrounds.

Assessments are primarily a mix of essays, research write-ups and examinations. I like the essays, especially the notion of just getting a title and having to create a reasoned response with little other than an indicative reading list. Recently, the university introduced an option for students to work with live briefs from incubation research companies. Initially, there was some resistance from more established academics but as the scheme is optional, it is now being introduced and is gaining in popularity with students who welcome the choice. The Year Two interdisciplinary enquiry project has come through its pilot phase successfully and within this module, students can help define the type of interactivity undertaken in sessions, distinguish some epistemological aspects such as practical or conceptual emphases and they can co-design assessment processes across the interdisciplinary groups within this contained experience. I am part of the Student Union representation which has worked closely with the Vice Chancellor’s Project Group and we are very excited about this module and see it as a good way to develop essential attributes and it may become a great way to market this innovative institution.

In trying to extend its reach, Platinum recently introduced some accelerated courses for students with significant academic potential. It is envisaged that some of these students – principally those from poorer social backgrounds - will be fast-tracked to complete a full undergraduate degree programme in two rather than three years in certain subjects, but will only be charged for two years of study. This will be achieved by filling the Third Semester of each two year programme with full course activities so that less debt is incurred via an enhanced experience. This initiative makes me proud to be a student at progressive Platinum!

**THE BIG TASK**

Please consider the allocated University and the Student Case Study and discuss as a group.

1. **What does flexible learning look like generally at this university?** (The list below is used by Barnett as a prompt for universities to consider their respective levels of flexibility - so you may find it useful)

* Is there any recognition of **prior learning**?
* Can students **switch disciplines**?
* Are there any **delivery patterns** students can use such as F2F, DL, blended?
* Can students **negotiate** the ways in which they are **assessed**?
* Do students have some **epistemological control**?
* Can students **personalise** their **learning**?
* Who defines the level of **interaction**?
* Do students have flexible registration options so they can vary the **pace of** their **studies**?
* Can students **interrupt** their **studies**?
* Does this university allow **credit acquisition** to be recognised in addition to staged entry and exit points?
* Can students influence the **timings** and **frequency** of **assessments**?
* Are students permitted to alter **course contents**?
* **Anything else** you wish to mention?

1. **Once you have a sense of what your allocated university's flexibility looks like, please write up your ideas on the brown paper scroll.** (You may also wish to consider the following)

* What are the **strengths** of this kind of approach to flexibility? 
* How do you manage the **degree of risk** to quality in this kind of university?
* What needs to be **preserved or safeguarded** in this university? 
* What are the absolute **hazards to be avoided** at all costs? 

Please use the symbols provided - and glue and markers - to produce a lovely annotated collage of the flexible learning status of your chosen university.

1. **Are there any aspects of this university's flexible learning approach that Sheffield Hallam should note for its own flexibility?**