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### **3. Student engagement and £9,000 fees**

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The issues Sheffield faced as a result of the change to a maximum £9,000 undergraduate fee arose from the University's position as a leading research and teaching institution, offering a broad range of disciplines – including many regarded nationally as 'Strategically Important and Vulnerable Subjects' and disciplines with long courses of more than three years' duration. As a founder member of the Russell Group, and a university with a global reputation for the high quality of its provision, nothing about the new fee regime suggested to the University's Senate, Executive Board or University Council that there should be any fundamental change in the University's mission or overall shape.

The University's Learning and Teaching Strategy 2011-16, *Global Education in a Civic University*, remained a cornerstone for action. Nevertheless, considerable efforts were made to understand the implications of the change. Sheffield has a proud history of joint working between the University and the Students' Union, and all discussions – including on fee setting, the amount to be devoted to access and outreach, and capital expenditure – included student representatives as key participants. Inevitable emphasis was placed on ensuring that future students would get value for money.

“*Inevitable emphasis was placed on ensuring that future students would get value for money*”

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## **Changes in finance and other variables**

In recent years, teaching income (tuition fees and education contracts) has made up around 40 per cent of the University's total income; with other funding council grants, research grants and contracts, endowments and other income (residential and commercial) making up the remainder.

Students subject to the new £9,000 fee regime represented around two-thirds of Sheffield's intake in 2012/13. University recruitment is selecting rather than recruiting and the target intake for home undergraduate students has lain in the range 4,000 to 4,500 for several years.

An important development that accompanied the introduction of the new fee regime was the freeing of number controls for top-grade students, who were defined in a way that seemed arbitrary and which created problems when admitting, for example, students from the wider EU or with widening participation indicators. Because Sheffield historically had admissions standards that were above the national average, the University received relatively few places for students achieving below AAB at A-Level. Although there was initially some expectation that overall recruitment could be increased from among the highest qualified, it was quickly

realised that competition for such students would make this outcome unlikely and probably undesirable in terms of short-term pressures on resources and the student experience. In the event, in 2012/13 new registrations fell in line with the national trend, compared to those entering the previous year, and this lower intake has had an impact on income in subsequent years.

Other important changes occurred alongside the increase in fees. In particular, capital funding for universities was cut. The University had to generate a surplus on its operating activities to cover depreciation and replace its existing capital stock as well as to provide a source of funding for new capital developments.

A further complexity was the requirement for universities to rethink their spending on widening participation, outreach and bursary support. The Students' Union at Sheffield was particularly keen to push such expenditure up, with the aim of maintaining the University's position as one of the best in the Russell Group on key widening participation indicators. Student altruism was such that they set on one side arguments about the opportunity costs of high outreach expenditure – that the amount available for the library or for IT, for example, would be correspondingly less. The University now commits a significant proportion (28.7 per cent) of the difference between £6,000 and £9,000 towards widening access and student success through its agreement with the Office for Fair Access.

Two further elements are important as well: the inclusion of full course costs in the fees and enhancement projects. Even before the National Union of Students had launched its campaign on inclusive fees, Sheffield had decided that the student fee should cover all compulsory additional costs that students had previously paid separately. The most expensive items were field classes and site visits for subjects such as Archaeology, Architecture, Ecology, Geography, and Town Planning. But there were also costs associated with the purchase of personal equipment or safety clothing in various departments in the Science, Engineering and Medical faculties. The most difficult issues arose over compulsory books for students in the Faculty of Arts and Humanities, which required clarity over library access to, or personal provision of, set texts.

Initiatives to enhance the student experience were developed as part of Project 2012. Previously, these would have been funded from HEFCE's Teaching Enhancement and Student Success allocation but this was cut at the same time as other aspects of HEFCE funding.

While the media emphasis was on fee increases, changes in these other parameters meant that the impact of the change was wider and more complex than has generally been understood. The University's modelling for the future needed to include:

- overall increases in income from tuition fees for UK and EU undergraduate students;

## Project 2012

In December 2010, Professor Keith Burnett, the Vice-Chancellor, announced Project 2012 to coordinate preparation for the new £9,000 funding regime. He indicated that the purpose was 'to engage our whole community – our students, professional service and academic staff – in building on our successes and ambitions, and to lay out clearly the value of what we offer to our students.'

Six work-streams were set up, each composed of a mix of academic and professional services staff, and student representatives. These groups covered specific areas:

- i. The creation of an agreed proposition detailing what all students could expect to receive as part of their education and wider development at the University.
- ii. Consideration of the University's competitive position.
- iii. The creation of the new Access commitment.
- iv. Student expectations, particularly relating to capital projects to benefit their experience – this group made particularly full use of student representatives.
- v. Market research, taking the proposition to an outside audience.
- vi. Modelling projected student numbers, fees, costs and related financial issues.

A crucial complement of the work coordinated by Project 2012 was to develop a new covenant with students and those who support their time at the University. The aim was that the University's dialogue with students and graduates should be a partnership based on trust and mutual goals, rather than a commercial relationship dictated by a market and fees. We wanted to enhance what we offered, to assert the values we held in common, and build stronger partnerships with our students, their supporters and potential employers.

- reductions in HEFCE recurrent grant income – when combined with the fee increase, this meant cuts for some subjects and increases for others;
- changes in student numbers influenced by the higher fee, changed applicant behaviour, greater competition and partial reduction in number controls;
- costs arising from the University's capital investment plans and the impact of reductions in HEFCE capital funding;
- additional costs associated with the required Access Agreement;
- additional costs associated with including all compulsory costs within course fees; and
- additional costs arising from student enhancement, given likely higher student expectations.

To fulfil these needs, the University required a higher annual surplus to support capital investment. The new fees regime of 2012 did not herald a cash bonanza.

## **The Sheffield Experience**

What does the £9,000 fee give students access to at Sheffield? The wording of that previous sentence is important: it is a question of creating opportunities for students and encouraging them to be taken up, not of forcing a particular set of experiences on everyone. The institution is autonomous and seeks to develop autonomy in its students but, as with other institutions, within certain parameters. We recognise

that similar groups of universities make similar offers to candidates and students – Sheffield, as a large comprehensive civic and research-intensive Russell Group institution, has a unique offer to make with the others who share those characteristics. But what it has done is blend those elements in ways that provide distinctive value, culture and flavour to produce the Sheffield Graduate.

This blend is made up of a series of promises to all students, grouped around five themes: your course; your personal development; your support; your community; and your future. Of these, the most exciting has been the one on personal development.

This promise is based on a concept of whole-person education, seeking to extend students' intellectual development beyond their own individual discipline(s), and also developing their wider selves through extracurricular activities, a languages-for-all programme and an extension to existing enterprise and community volunteering activities. Emphasis is placed on co-working with the Students' Union – shown by numerous surveys, including the *National Student Survey* for 2012, 2013 and 2014, to be the best in the country.

Recent reflection on the promises made in 2012 led the University to extend inter-disciplinarity further, and from 2015 onwards all undergraduates will undertake an inter-disciplinary project within their faculty in their first year and a cross-faculty research project in their second. This is a clear benefit of studying in a comprehensive research-intensive university.



“The new fees regime did not bring revolutionary change”

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Project 2012 also led to significant student-facing capital investment – despite the loss of HEFCE capital funding – with eight specific projects amounting to over £164 million. These include major refurbishment of the Students’ Union building, a newly-created skills hub and advice centre, a major upgrade of pooled teaching space across the institution and an £85 million new-build to create additional teaching rooms, as well as an extension to a 24-hour Information Commons (blending library and IT facilities).

## Conclusion

The new fees regime did not bring revolutionary change at Sheffield. The institution stuck with its overall mission, its strategic plan and its strategies for learning and teaching. The period leading up to the new regime brought a period of reflection, but ultimately a reaffirmation of the direction of travel. Tomaso di Lampedusa, in *Il Gattopardo* (The Leopard) said: ‘If we want things to stay the same, things will have to change.’

Sheffield has wanted to stay the same: delivering world-class education to its undergraduates. But to do so it has had to change certain aspects of its model for educational delivery

and capital financing. To date, students seem very happy with what is offered, as seen in recruitment to targets for numbers, tariff and widening participation, not to mention the University's recent number one position in the *Times Higher Education* Student Experience Survey for 2014.