Historical Note

Origins of the University

The University of Sheffield developed from three local institutions: the Sheffield School of Medicine, Firth College and the Sheffield Technical School. The School of Medicine, founded in 1828, was by far the oldest. Its early history was very insecure and it was saved from collapse by the opening of Firth College, which took over the teaching of all basic science subjects to medical students.

Firth College was one of a group of university colleges founded in the later 19th century. It developed out of the Cambridge University Extension Movement, a scheme designed to bring university teaching to the large towns and cities of England, most of which lacked any university provision. The success of these courses in Sheffield led Mark Firth, a local steel manufacturer, to establish the College in 1879 as a centre for teaching Arts and Science subjects.

The Sheffield Technical School was the product of local concern about the need for better technical training of the men responsible for running the great industries of Sheffield, particularly steelmaking. A movement was started within Firth College to collect funds to create a technical department, which was established in 1884 as the Sheffield Technical School. In 1886 the School moved to new premises on the site of the old Grammar School at St George's Square.

In 1897, the three institutions were amalgamated by Royal Charter to form the University College of Sheffield. This step was part of the plan to link up with the Victoria University, a federation of the University Colleges at Manchester, Liverpool and Leeds.

By 1900, however, the Federal University was disintegrating and within a few years independent universities were formed from the three University Colleges.

On 31 May 1905 the University of Sheffield was granted its Royal Charter, and in July the new Firth Court Building on Western Bank was opened by King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra. St George's Square remained the centre of Applied Science departments, with Arts, Medicine and Science being housed at Western Bank.

The University in 1905

At the time of the University's foundation in 1905 there were 114 full-time students reading for degrees in Arts, Pure Science, Medicine and Applied Science. In 1919 when returning ex-servicemen were admitted in large numbers, the full-time student figure rose to a short-lived peak of about 1,000. By then the Faculty of Applied Science had split into Engineering and Metallurgy; the University's first Hall of Residence (the original Stephenson Hall) had been established; and the Edgar Allen library had opened (1909).

At that time the University was as committed to non-degree teaching as to teaching full-time students. Courses covered not only many conventional academic subjects but also topics as diverse as cow-keeping, railway economics, mining and razor-grinding. During the First World War some of these were replaced by teaching of (and participation in) munitions making, medical appliances design and production, translation and politics.

Between the two wars full-time student numbers stabilised at about 750 and expansion into new areas of specialist teaching and research continued slowly. The Second World War brought with it new areas of specialist research and training - in, for example, radar, dietary and vitamin studies, production of anaesthetics and chemicals (as substitutes for materials previously imported from

Europe), magnetism, fuel production and economy, naval cartography, glass manufacture and English language teaching.

Since the Second World War

Since the Second World War, many older houses have been brought into academic use and major new buildings have been constructed - the Western Bank Library in 1959, and the Arts Tower, Hicks Building, Alfred Denny Building, Sir Robert Hadfield Building, Chemical Engineering Building, University House, five Halls of Residence and the Students' Union in the 1960s.

New buildings for Geography and Psychology followed in the 1970s, along with the Crookesmoor Building (for Law and Management), the Royal Hallamshire Hospital, and purpose-built student flats. The next decade saw the opening of the Octagon Centre, the Sir Henry Stephenson Building (for engineering), and major extensions at the Northern General Hospital.

In the 1990s, new premises for the School of Clinical Dentistry, the Management School, the School of Education, St George's Library and St George's Flats and Lecture Theatre were opened, together with extensions to Stephenson, Halifax, and Tapton Halls of Residence, and three new blocks of student flats.

The Regent Court building, which houses the School of Computer Science and the Information School and the Sheffield Centre for Health and Related Research, were also completed. The Students' Union underwent a significant development programme, improving welfare, social and meetings facilities.

Following the University's integration with the Sheffield and North Trent College of Nursing and Midwifery in 1995, a building programme provided new facilities for nursing and midwifery teaching and research. This includes the extension and conversion of the St George's Hospital site on Winter Street, and the construction of a new building at the Northern General Hospital.

The 21st Century

The University and its estate continue to evolve in response to the changing needs of our students, staff and partners.

Spanning a network of academic, research and social spaces, our campus brings together historic and modern buildings supported by a growing emphasis on high-quality public realm. We are working to create a more connected, welcoming and accessible environment – one that enhances collaboration, supports wellbeing, and offers benefits to the wider community as well as the University.

We have also seen major expansion on the edge of Sheffield and beyond, with Advanced Manufacturing Research Centre (AMRC) facilities in Rotherham and Sheffield, AMRC Cymru at Broughton and AMRC North West in Blackburn.

In 2025, we launched Runway Park, a transformative 100-acre development on the site of the former Sheffield City Airport that will form a key part of our Innovation District. Over the next few years, Runway Park will become central to South Yorkshire's innovation ecosystem, and will attract investment, create high-quality jobs, and accelerate economic growth in the region, as well helping organisations innovate and thrive as the challenges they face continue to evolve.

Improving the student experience

For our first 50 years, our full-time student population did not rise above 2,000. By 1980, it had reached over 8,000 and by 2006, it had risen to 21,000. Today it stands at around 28,000, with students from more than 150 countries.

As a result, we have invested in a range of dedicated student facilities to cover everything that students may need during their experience at the University of Sheffield.

From a custom-built University Health Centre and refurbished Students' Union, the redevelopment of residential accommodation on the Endcliffe and Ranmoor sites, and upgrading our Information Commons – a library and study space building with 24-hour access – to further development of our sports centre at Norton to incorporate two new artificial pitches with spectator seating and new changing facilities, we have continued to ensure that the student experience in Sheffield is amongst the very best in the country.

Transformative research facilities

The University of Sheffield is a world leader when it comes to research into areas including clean energy, engineering, neuroscience and gene therapy, so it is only right we have the world-leading facilities to match.

This includes our Energy Innovation Centre, where our dedicated sustainable aviation fuels laboratory is leading the change to greener aviation, and our national-scale research facilities allow researchers and industry partners to develop and test hydrogen and other low carbon technologies at pilot scale.

We also opened the Gene Therapy Innovation and Manufacturing Centre in 2024, which helps to accelerate the development of life-changing treatments, offering hope for patients with conditions such as motor neuron disease, cystic fibrosis and haemophilia.

We are home to the award winning AMRC Factory of the Future, which is focused on machining research and allows partner companies to develop and trial new technologies, and the AMRC Factory 2050, the UK's first digital state-of-the-art factory dedicated to conducting collaborative research into reconfigurable digitally assisted assembly, component manufacturing and machining technologies.

Iconic learning spaces

Over the last couple of decades, the University of Sheffield has become home to some of the best and most iconic learning spaces anywhere in the UK.

Most recently, we opened The Wave, a world-class social sciences facility that enhances the student experience and encourages interdisciplinary research.

In 2020, we opened the Engineering Heartspace, a quadruple height atrium between the Grade II listed Sir Frederick Mappin Building and the 1885 Central Wing, creating a dynamic social and research collaboration between the two oldest buildings in the University estate.

The University is also home to The Diamond, a striking learning and teaching building at the heart of the campus which houses 19 laboratories for the Faculty of Engineering.

Supporting a greener, cleaner Sheffield

As a University rooted in one of the UK's greenest cities, we're committed to creating a campus that enhances quality of life, supports biodiversity, and builds climate resilience. Our green spaces, such as new pocket parks developed across campus, are more than just places to relax; they provide habitats for wildlife, help reduce surface water runoff, and contribute to wellbeing for students, staff and the wider community. Working in partnership with Sheffield City Council, we have transformed key spaces including Leavygreave Road and the University Concourse into greener, safer, and more accessible environments. New lighting, seating, planting, public art and a secure cycle hub are helping to embed sustainability and wellbeing into the everyday experience of our campus.

We are investing significantly in the future of our campus, refurbishing buildings to meet high sustainability standards and preparing for a transition away from fossil fuel heating. With buildings accounting for a major share of emissions and resource use, we're applying circular economy principles, prioritising retrofitting, using lower-carbon materials and designing for long-term flexibility and reuse. Alongside this, we're taking steps to reduce our operational energy use, improve indoor air quality, and make our estate more resilient to climate change. Our ambition is clear: to create one of the most sustainable and engaging university campuses in the UK, an environment that supports wellbeing, biodiversity, and inclusive access, while showcasing our leadership on climate action.

Sheffield Innovation Spine and spinouts

Sheffield is creating a strong future for University spinouts, laying the foundations for the next generation of research-driven innovators to thrive. For spinouts to prosper, and to make Sheffield an attractive ecosystem to nurture startups, we need to invest in the right infrastructure to support them. This includes research facilities, modern office space and incubators. That's why we're working with regional partners such as Sheffield Hallam University, Sheffield Technology Parks, South Yorkshire Mayoral Combined Authority, and Sheffield City Council to develop the Sheffield Innovation Spine.

This is a long-term strategic plan focussed on developing the infrastructure needed to support the scaling of knowledge-led businesses in the city centre, and creating a network linking our campus with existing developments such as West Bar Square and Castlegate.