

Student and Academic Services Strategy 2015-2017¹

Context

UK higher education is an increasingly competitive environment where change is happening at a faster pace than we have experienced in many decades. The University has ambitions to maintain its reputation for excellence in research, learning and teaching, and the overall student experience. We have a huge amount to recommend us to both students and staff; however, we recognise that many of our competitors are making improvements that have consequences for our comparative reputation.

The University's vision

As set out in the University Strategy 2014-20, the University's vision is to provide an environment which attracts the best staff and students from all over the world, where every individual feels valued and has a sense of belonging and community. It aims to distinguish itself by its outstanding quality and value of the experience it offers students and specifically mentions the role of the colleges in supporting their cultural, social, academic and personal development. This strategy sets out the way in which Student and Academic Services plans to contribute to that vision.

Our current position

While metrics and league tables are only partial indicators of quality and performance, they are influential in defining our reputation to our students, prospective applicants, parents, employers, industry partners and other universities. Our position in league tables has been declining. We are no longer in the top 10 in the UK, nor are we in the top 100 globally. In the most recent Times league table (*The Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide*, 2015), for instance, York is ranked in 16th place, our lowest ranking and a notable drop from a few years ago when we were confidently in the top 10. That we are ranked as high as 16th is largely attributable to the strength of our results in the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise, which informs the league tables for 2015²: we rank 9th for research. In contrast, we rank 54th for student satisfaction, a measure which incorporates students' opinion of their learning experience as well as their experience overall. We admit very able students who achieve well academically (we rank 17th on entry tariff and 16th for the proportion of students who get a good honours degree). However, the completion rate and quality of graduate destinations are disappointing; we are ranked 20th for completion and 37th for graduate prospects.

While league tables are based on selected metrics and focus on undergraduate students, they do impact upon perceptions of the University more widely as well as on recruitment at all levels. Our competitors have also been advancing more quickly than us in some areas that have an impact on student satisfaction, such as the adoption of lecture recording facilities, more innovative approaches to enhancing employability, student administration management systems and the implementation of a CPD framework for staff with teaching responsibilities.

Student and Academic Services only has a direct impact on some areas of the metrics but we have an important role in supporting the wider University, in particular academic departments, to drive forward change. We must also collaborate effectively and strategically with other directorates and with our two students' unions to ensure that the improvements we need to see are implemented.

¹ Written in 2015 and updated October 2016.

² In *The Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide* (2016) York ranked: 15th overall; 17th for research (this drop is largely because York submitted a lower proportion of its academics for assessment in the 2014 Research Excellence Framework than most of the leading universities); 22nd for student satisfaction; 17th entry tariff, 15th for completion; and 38th for graduate prospects.

This will require intricate journey mapping and considered use of performance data, research evidence, and other intelligence about our internal and external markets.

Adapting to the changing environment

With the lifting in 2015 of the controls on numbers of home and EU undergraduates that universities can admit we expect that competition for students will become more fierce. Our position in the league tables will take on an importance that we have not seen before. The expectations placed upon universities have been evolving in recent years. We anticipate an increase in the numbers of PG students and aim to grow the size of our student intake by offering more distance learning programmes. Students increasingly recognise the investment they are making in their future and as a result demand more from us. Universities are expected to account for the value they provide in exchange for public and private investment. We need to be able to demonstrate the quality of what we offer in order to remain an attractive prospect for study. Following the vote to exit the EU, we may see student numbers rise (due to the weak pound), or we may see them fall (due to immigration constraints and perceptions of the UK). The former could impact significantly on the competition in our markets and the latter on our budgets. Following recent changes in government, and the Higher Education and Research Bill currently progressing through Parliament, we are likely to see new legislation which could also impact on our work with agencies such as the QAA, HEFCE, HESA, SLC etc. We should anticipate that change will remain a constant and we need to be responsive to an increasingly changeable environment.

The role of Student and Academic Services

As one of the largest professional service directorates we make a significant impact on the University's ability to achieve its ambition of offering an outstanding and valuable experience and to support our colleagues in achieving excellence in research, teaching and the student experience. We are in a strong position to shape and influence the way the University delivers its objectives. While we should be proud of our achievements and the improvements we have made in recent times, we need to continue to innovate and improve at a rate that enables us to compare favourably with our competitors. We also need to be able to maintain the quality of what we do within the context of the institutional plan to grow student numbers, increase our distance learning provision, and introduce faculties and a Graduate Research School. Given the financial constraints that affect the whole University, we must do this within our existing resources as far as possible.

Our staff are committed to providing excellent services of a high professional standard. We are at times frustrated by being unable to invest as we would wish in projects and systems that would improve our provision and effectiveness. This strategy will provide the means for us to prioritise activities and resources so that we can create this capacity. In general our staff are highly engaged. Student and Academic Services scored 82% on the staff engagement index in the recent staff survey. This compares favourably with 80% for the University as a whole. However the proportion of our staff who responded negatively is also marginally greater than for the University as a whole (5% to the University's 4%). We aim to maintain our high positive score and reduce the size of the negative response by working with staff to address issues. We recognise the important role that strategically-led continuing professional development plays in engaging staff in excellent delivery and continuing improvement of our services. We will support staff capability, and recognise and manage performance so that we recruit, develop and retain staff who are among the best in their professional area.

Student and Academic Services provides a collection of professional services which contribute to the quality of the student experience. While the principal beneficiary of our contribution is the student, much of what we do is on behalf of the institution, or is in collaboration with colleagues in order to enhance the service they provide to students. Our collective aims are to ensure that students have an exemplary experience and are able to achieve their full academic potential, that the university complies with external requirements, that our provision is of the highest professional standard, and that this quality is evident, consistent and recognised. We recognise that students' own effort and engagement will play a major part in the quality of their learning and experience. However, we also recognise that we are employed to deliver services that promote and prioritise the benefits to our users and are designed with these benefits in mind. In August 2015, we

changed our name from Academic Registry to Student and Academic Services so as to convey a better sense of what we do that is readily understood by our team and our stakeholders. This name better reflects our collection of services and contribution to the University, and to the student experience.

This strategy summarises what Student and Academic Services needs to do to respond to the challenges that we, our students and above all our institution face so that we can maintain a sector-leading and highly competitive student experience as well as continue to provide an enjoyable and rewarding work environment for our staff. In adopting this strategy, we will protect and, where needed, enhance those activities which impact most significantly on our key measures of performance. We will attempt to balance the need for change with the need to maintain business continuity and manage the risks that disruption can bring. We will engage staff and students in formal consultation on how to achieve what is needed and use existing data, such as the staff survey, to guide our actions. This, along with the realities of what is possible, will determine our decisions.

Aspiration and objectives

Our aspiration is to lead the University in ensuring that our students have an exceptional and transformational experience.

Objective 1

To deliver support, development and administrative services that are user-focussed, accessible, efficient and effective.

Our points of contact with students have developed in a way that has been constrained by our organisational history, structure and, above all, our space. It is not always obvious to students or staff where to go for which service or support function. Despite the disappointment of not being able to co-locate our services in new space in Market Square, as was planned when the original strategy was published, we need to proceed with redesigning our face-to-face and online services so that they are welcoming, logical and accessible for both students and staff. In doing so, our priority will be an understanding of students' needs above any other concerns. We also need to continue to work to find alternative solutions to our space constraints.

Strategies for achieving this objective:

- work with student-facing services in other Directorates to make the best use of the available buildings so as to best meet students' needs;
- review our internal processes for online and face-to-face service delivery to ensure they are as efficient and effective as possible;
- work with students, students' unions and existing data to understand how effective our services are and how students want to use them;
- review the way we present our services within the context of any new locations to ensure they are communicated effectively around understandable themes;
- work with Estates to plan how we model our buildings to: accommodate our needs and deliver optimal services; support staff productivity; and reduce our need to occupy temporary or seasonal space;
- make best use of enterprise systems to support the student journey and make our services more accessible and effective for users;
- work with the Operations Managers to ensure efficiencies occur across the University in partnership with academic departments;
- work with staff outside Student and Academic Services, to promote better understanding and signposting of our services and to maintain and develop an integrated partnership that supports our students and reduces 'failure demand'.

Objective 2

To integrate the colleges within Student and Academic Services, ensuring coordinated support and development opportunities across the directorate that are student-centred and student-led.

The inclusion of colleges within Student and Academic Services provides us with an exciting opportunity to work collaboratively between our central services and our colleges in our shared effort to support the student journey and enhance our students' experience. By integrating the colleges, we will be able to work in a way that focuses on facilitating student-led activities that enable students to take control over their learning, development and future employability.

Strategies for achieving this objective:

- implement the outcome of the college pilot review, including enabling the involvement of college staff in Student and Academic Services-wide projects;
- support all colleges in developing and delivering their strategic aims, so that all students experience the full benefits of a transformative college life and the support it offers to their academic, social and career development;
- develop the college level, student-led variant of the York Award and other mechanisms for enhancing student leadership and employability skills through engagement in college life;
- establish a college office for coordinating consistently excellent (though distinct) provision and facilitating collaboration for the delivery of student services and opportunities.

Objective 3

To support our student community in developing the academic, personal and social skills necessary to engage with a complex and demanding world and in aspiring to achieve great things in their lives as graduates.

The primary purpose is to enable students to achieve their full potential by:

- assuring and enhancing the quality of learning and teaching;
- minimising the impact of aspects of student life that can inhibit and compromise learning;
- providing an efficient service for the administration of their journey;
- facilitating their membership of communities that can accelerate their development and offer a sense of belonging;
- enabling them to develop and implement their plans for their futures beyond graduation;
- providing the principal source of support for academics in managing, delivering and promoting excellence in teaching and learning and thereby impacting positively on students' attainment and satisfaction.

We need to improve our students' employability and career aspirations. With the integration of the colleges and in our work with the students' unions, we have the potential to work in partnership with students to promote a stronger culture of aspiration and success. To ensure we develop a coherent approach across Student and Academic Services, we need to critically review our service culture and the assumptions we make when we work with students. We also need to work closely with academic departments to ensure that we explore opportunities for employer engagement both within and outside the curriculum. The results of this review and development will be to create an environment in which students develop a range of capabilities, have high aspirations and who develop the resilience and self-reliance they need in their graduate careers.

Strategies for achieving this objective:

- support the development of an institutional pedagogy that promotes independent learning and emphasises work outside the classroom, providing students with a distinctive learning and teaching experience;
- enhance the pedagogic skills of our academic community, promoting the HEA Professional Standards Framework and developing a comprehensive approach to fostering the teaching skills of our academic colleagues;
- work in partnership with academic colleagues, the York Graduate Research School and our students' unions to improve the provision for postgraduate and research students;

- establish a dedicated provision that coordinates and supports students' induction and transition to University and encourages students' self-agency and resilience;
- work in close partnership with student organisations on peer-support for transition to academic and independent life;
- review our personal support service culture and re-focus it on facilitating the development of resilience enabling students to 'bounce back' where possible;
- support our students' development of appropriate strategies for life in diverse, intergenerational and intercultural communities;
- ensure our distance learning students have access to support and resources of the same quality as our campus students and that these resources are scalable to respond to any increase in numbers;
- ensure that students and staff within academic departments understand where specialist support can be accessed for those who need it;
- ensure that staff in academic departments see the value of employer engagement in academic programmes and that pedagogic approaches develop skills that enhance employability;
- promote the excellent online resources available to advise and educate students in how to manage their careers and develop their employability;
- engage proactively with more graduate recruiters;
- develop services targeted at postgraduate and international students so they feel strongly that their employability has benefitted from their choice to study at York.

Objective 4

To develop clearer strategies for communicating with our stakeholders and users, to ensure they are aware of and understand the purpose, professionalism and value of our services; and to ensure that we listen to our students and other stakeholders and gather appropriate data to help with the regular review of our work.

Our undergraduate students are less satisfied than those at many of our competitor institutions. While we may believe that engagement is a more useful indicator of student learning, satisfaction is very influential as a measure of the quality of the student experience. We also recognise the need to maintain a focus on postgraduate students, so that their experience receives as much of our attention and in a way that is appropriate for their particular needs. We offer many excellent services but in order to improve we need to understand how all our students wish to use those services and identify any barriers in the way. We need to communicate more with our students about their experience and show how we are responding to their feedback. We also need to be more effective in promoting what we do well to our internal markets and create more opportunities to listen to students and seek information on their needs. Following the Marketing restructure, we will continue to work in close partnership with colleagues in External Relations to achieve these aims. We need also to ensure that our communications with staff across the institution enable them to understand what we do and how we can support them and their responsibilities in our shared work.

Strategies for achieving this objective:

- appoint a full-time member of staff with marketing and communications expertise to lead on developing a communications strategy across Student and Academic Services³;
- use internal and independent expertise to review our current marketing strategies and materials and re-develop our publicity so that they are more effective;
- develop new publicity and messages to highlight the advantages of our collegiate system and help inform applicant choices;
- ensure that we create regular opportunities for gathering feedback from staff and students, such as through the Student First Initiative and regular focus groups and work with our students unions and other directorates to ensure that data that is gathered is robust and results are analysed, reported and considered so that the findings can be acted upon;

³ Although this strategy was implemented, it has been superseded by the Marketing Review, which will see communications support being centralised from March 2017, including the Directorate's Communications Advisor.

- create capacity and processes for analysing, reporting and making management decisions based on data about our users and their response to our services and interventions, and on high quality research evidence;
- make better use of management information to assess the impact of our promotional activities on service delivery and usage;
- develop methods of maintaining awareness of improvements across the institution so that they can be communicated to students.

Objective 5

To work together across Student and Academic Services to ensure effective cross-collaboration between teams, the opportunity to develop new approaches and innovate where needed and adapt when new challenges arise.

We need to develop new ways of working that enable more flexibility and collaboration in response to the changing environment. While good relationships exist across Student and Academic Services, the way the directorate has developed over time and the constraints on space has inevitably had an impact on how we work and has not facilitated cross-team developments in the way we would like. While we have been more fortunate than some directorates, we have not been able to secure new investment for everything that is needed. The University strategy places demands on all parts of the institution without the resource to put extra funds into all areas. We must therefore make efficiencies and release our own resources for work in new areas. We are lacking in some areas of capacity and skill needed to do what is required of us over the next few years so we will work to free up resources to enable us to redeploy existing or recruit new staff.

Strategies for achieving this objective:

- map and analyse processes to identify barriers to achieving our service goals;
- consider how we align our sections and teams to address the challenges and priorities we are embracing and revise, where appropriate, our organisational structures to adjust to such challenges;
- ensure we have clear leadership of key strategic developments;
- develop a stronger, more integrated culture of service and process review, and project-based approaches to collaborative work, creating and protecting capacity for such strategic improvement projects;
- ensure our team structures have the flexibility to enable us to adapt to changing external requirements, such as faculties and a Graduate Research School;
- establish a planning process that coordinates our resources into cross-directorate projects more clearly, purposefully and strategically, led by senior staff who are responsible for an agenda and accountable for an outcome as well as for managing a team;
- ensure that individual and team objectives, performance management and staff development are aligned with our strategic aims and inform one another;
- maintain and develop our professional knowledge skills so that we can be and remain at the 'top of our game' within our respective areas of expertise;
- produce and deliver a programme of staff development to promote a shift in the way we engage with users, to enhance the quality of our service, communications and professional skills, and to extend our understanding of the work that other sections and directorates do so that we can work more effectively together;
- ensure our staff are supported through times of change and that they are able to meet challenges with resilience;
- seek to increase our staff capacity in areas where we are lacking certain skills, specifically technical staff to support the development and use of IT applications;
- improve the way in which we generate and use management information to support and inform our service evaluation and development;
- review our front-of-house provision in the context of the new space and structure in terms of the practicalities of our service delivery and our service culture;
- work with IT Services to further develop our road map for service development and systems use;

- work with IT Services and the Operations Managers to review and develop the governance/oversight for student-related systems to ensure that the planning and development of new systems and services retains a strategic fit with institutional and Student and Academic Services objectives.

Objective 6

To further develop our relationships with staff in academic departments and other services to ensure optimal support for them and effective working of our own teams in order to improve the experience of students and enhance the reputation of the University as a whole.

Student and Academic Services provides business critical services for staff in departments and other central services and works in partnership with those staff on aspects of the student experience. Student and Academic Services staff contribute expertise which has its own professional depth and strength, which we offer as specialist service providers and as consultants. To ensure that Student and Academic Services can collaborate effectively with academic departments in our shared work, it is essential that our colleagues value the contribution we make and understand the benefits of investing time in working with us. Providing a professional service that has a positive impact on the student experience also involves building expertise within departments and empowering them to act. Presenting ourselves as skilled professionals in our own right, we will enhance the regard in which we are held and the efficacy of our efforts. By forging closer links across the University, we can make improvements to services that are broader than Student and Academic Services.

Strategies for achieving this objective:

- organise our services along faculty lines, where appropriate, so that we can be more aligned with academic departments' needs, cultures and goals;
- market and target Student and Academic Services professional services more effectively in order to ensure that staff understand and value what is on offer, and those whom we most wish to effect are aware of the provision and are encouraged to engage;
- work with the Operations Managers, to coordinate end-to-end reviews of core student-facing services that cross multiple points of delivery (including academic and support departments), and lead on the implementation of new business processes which better meet the needs of our students;
- work closely with departments and other central services to build expertise and knowledge outside Student and Academic Services in order to pursue common goals and facilitate better working relationships.

Objective 7

To support and develop our staff to ensure they achieve their potential, are equipped to deal with challenges and are recognised as an effective and professional service by staff and students across the University.

Student and Academic Services delivers many excellent services, often in difficult circumstances, and against the background of the limitations described here. We celebrate the excellent staff who provide these services and whose professionalism, skills and creativity lie behind them. In order to meet the challenges of our changing business environment and assist the University in implementing the institutional strategy, we need to continue to attract, develop and retain highly skilled people who strive for excellence. We need to provide the supportive environment that will enable them to respond flexibly to changes and adapt to the needs of colleagues.

Strategies for achieving this aspiration:

- articulate and embed our shared values and the expected behaviours of all staff members working within the Student and Academic Services;
- introduce generic grade descriptors to help people to understand the comparability in grade of different roles, and thus be more aware of possible pathways for personal development;

- improve teamwork and approaches to sharing workload and support for each other over busy periods;
- ensure measures are in place that promote the health and well-being of our staff;
- engage fully in all elements of the Professional@York scheme and other staff development programmes to ensure staff possess the necessary skills for their roles and have appropriate opportunities for progression.

Benefits

Benefits to our students

- Improved service provision
- Greater clarity about where and how to access what service to meet which need
- Clearer lines of communication with the University
- More opportunities to develop skills for their academic work and the future
- Greater support for learning and development through volunteering and other student-led activities, improved employability and graduate outcomes
- A greater sense of community with the University and with each other
- Greater satisfaction with their student experience, and a stronger sense that the University meets their needs, leading to greater confidence in their ability to take the next step
- Improved graduate outcomes.

Benefits to Student and Academic Services staff

- Greater clarity in their role and its responsibilities, accountabilities, work load, and relationships with others
- Improved employee satisfaction and engagement
- More consistency in the level of expectations of work at different grades and easier recognition of high performance
- Better insight into more senior roles and more opportunities to prepare for promotion through membership of a larger team
- Easier access to colleagues and more effective cross-section team working
- More effective planning of priorities, use of resources, and cross-boundary projects
- Some improvements in our working environment.

Benefits to colleagues outside Student and Academic Services

- Improved use of enterprise systems which support efficiency and facilitate key processes in progressing and serving students
- Easier referral of students to central services making them more effective in relieving departments of the need to help students access these
- Increased effectiveness and job satisfaction for staff with teaching responsibilities
- More opportunities for staff with teaching responsibilities to participate in effective and engaging professional development to enhance the quality of teaching and learning at all levels.

Benefits to the institution

- Improved student satisfaction leading to better league table placement
- Increased attractiveness to potential applicants
- A clear message about the sense of the York experience
- Improved graduate outcomes.

Challenges

In implementing this strategy, we are aware that there are a number of challenges for us to bear in mind and work to mitigate. We want to minimise the inevitable uncertainty that accompanies

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change and we will develop a communications plan to ensure staff are aware of developments and the timescale for implementing the changes. We need to ensure that all stakeholders, both within and external to Student and Academic Services, are appropriately included and consulted and we will develop a plan for this and for protecting the time required for appropriate consideration of suggestions and ideas. Finally, this strategy and its implementation need to be aligned with the University's medium and long term planning processes. We will support our staff in preparing for this change and we will work to communicate the benefits to our staff, students and other stakeholders as we undergo this process.