Introduction

This is my eighth and final Student Support Services annual report at York. Since making the decision to retire from this post in February 2013, my priority has been on handing over the reins in as orderly a manner as possible, in the context of the everyday demands of student support. This is reflected in this report, for example through forward plans, which are principally focussed upon consolidation and entering a period of transition.

This report should be read in conjunction with the 2011/12 management reports from the four sections of Student Support Services, which can be found at: http://www.york.ac.uk/student-support-services/annualreports/

Vision for service excellence

Our vision is to provide an accessible set of professional support services for students that meet the most relevant needs and are of an appropriate quality for the students of a world class, research-intensive University, which prides itself on providing an excellent student experience.

Some of these services are targeted at members of particular groups of students, for example international student orientation and immigration advice, undergraduate bursary administration, disability and dyslexia support and private sector housing advice. Others are intended for individual students who find themselves most in need, for example those with emotional or mental health difficulties, in unanticipated financial hardship or needing to appeal an academic decision.

To claim excellence these services need to be readily accessible, have an effective publicity strategy, act in accordance with appropriate policy and guidance, deal with students courteously and with skill, understand the impact of their interventions, evaluate the experience of students who are service-users and be committed to a continuous process of service improvement.

The service aims and objectives are published on our departmental web pages: http://www.york.ac.uk/student-support-services/aims/
A summary of key strands of service improvement strategy and progress with action

In identifying priorities for 2011/12 it was our intention to take forward the elements of our improvement strategy not yet successfully completed and add a realistic number of new emerging strands of priority development. Using this approach, last year we identified our top priorities as:

1. **Put in place software that will provide casework management tools and web-enabled student interactivity across SSS.**
2. **Rebrand Student Support Services.**
3. **Develop a quality strategy for SSS, which includes data collection, feedback and evaluation mechanisms.**
4. **Capture policies and practices in each service area, to support and streamline future decision making.**
5. **Articulate a development plan for the support of international students.**
6. **Develop new and improved student financial support processes.**
7. **Undertake the pilot and roll out of the Kognito (mental health awareness) package to get maximum benefit from the investment in the license.**
8. **Complete the student mental health policy.**
## 2011/12 Action Plan

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Milestones</th>
<th>Lead</th>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Progress</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Put in place software that will provide casework management tools and web-enabled student interactivity across SSS</strong></td>
<td>Transfer email and diary functions to Google Applications.</td>
<td>Manag’t Team</td>
<td>February 2012.</td>
<td>Completed. The diary functionality is being used effectively for appointment management at reception points and by advisers/practitioners.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Redefine our specification requirements for an IT system.</td>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>Paper by 23rd January 2013</td>
<td>Being written in consultation with Colleges, as the College Welfare teams also require a case-recording IT system to support their on-call developments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Develop on-line self certification process</td>
<td>Lizz + Registry Services</td>
<td>Completed February 2013</td>
<td>System in place and is being used for administration, still to enable student input online.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Record a greater proportion of special cases processes in SITS</td>
<td>Kathryn + Registry Services</td>
<td>July 2013</td>
<td>Work underway.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Review all other SSS publicity materials once the Hub is launched.</td>
<td>Jill/ Anne Sharmila/ Penn</td>
<td>June 2013</td>
<td>Underway, to be completed as pressure on service provision allows.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Develop a quality strategy for SSS, which includes data collection, feedback and evaluation mechanisms.</strong></td>
<td>Define required MI from IT systems.</td>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>December 2012</td>
<td>Done</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Develop an evaluation framework</td>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>February 2013</td>
<td>Following useful input from the whole SSS team at our September away-day, we are developing a quality monitoring framework, which will be passed on to the incoming Director.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
### Description

**Capture policies and practices in each service area, to support and streamline future decision making.**

Polices collected in each team in a format that is accessible for that team.

- **Milestones:**
  - Policies collected in each team in a format that is accessible for that team.

- **Lead:** Jill/ Anne Sharmila/
  - Penn

- **Target:** Progress in all sections by July 2012

- **Progress:** Policies in all teams being collated and held either electronically or in hard-copy as operational reference material.

**Articulate a development plan for the support of international students.**

Draft plan prepared.

- **Milestones:**
  - Draft plan prepared.

- **Lead:** Jill/Louise

- **Target:** September 2012

- **Progress:** Completed and forwarded to Kate Dodd in December 2012.

**New and improved student financial support processes.**

NSP distributed.

- **Milestones:**
  - NSP distributed.

- **Lead:** Sharmila

- **Target:** September 2012

- **Progress:** Achieved smoothly, feedback from departments positive.

  The 2011/12 SFSU Annual Report outlines that the Student Funding System has been successfully used to administer the new undergraduate home student funding package, including the National Scholarship Programme at York awards.

9. **Undertake the pilot and roll-out of the Kognito package to get maximum uptake.**

Pilot with at least 3 staff groups and one student group.

- **Milestones:**
  - Pilot with at least 3 staff groups and one student group.

- **Lead:** Steve

- **Target:** March 2012

- **Progress:** Achieved and feedback from pilot very positive.

  Staff package rolled out May 2012. Initial strong interest, but so far limited levels of take-up and of completion by those registering.

  Achieved. Restricted access due to risks of creating confusion over service provision if distributed widely across student population.

- **Staff package made widely available.**

- **Student package made available to those in welfare roles in YUSU/GSA and Colleges.**

- **Lead:** Steve

- **Target:** April 2012
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<tr>
<td>Student mental health policy.</td>
<td>Draft presented to summer 2012 SEC</td>
<td>Steve</td>
<td>May 2012</td>
<td>The policy was presented at the Summer meeting of the Student Experience Committee, as planned. Due to be returned to the Student Experience Committee with some final amendments from the University Legal Administrator and the University Records Manager</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1 – Action Plan

Data on service usage

There is data on service usage in each of the four section managerial reports, therefore just a few examples are included here:

Figure 1 compares the number of weekly enquiries to the reception in the Student Support Hub in the Autumn term of 2012 with the number to reception in Sally Baldwin, Block B, in Autumn 2011. It shows a 10-20% increase this year in the first half of term, evening out by mid-way through the term. It is too early to judge the impact of having the Student Support Hub in a high profile location in Market Square, but this first indication suggests that is has improved accessibility of Student Support Services for students.

Figure 1

Weekly reception enquiries

![Weekly reception enquiries graph](image-url)
In the appendix of the Disability Services Management Report there is a table of the numbers of students declaring each of the main categories of disability over the past five years, summarised in Figure 2. This shows very clearly that Dyslexia is by far the largest category and that numbers of students declaring dyslexia has increased steadily year on year, at a rate of roughly 10% per annum (48% over five years).

The largest increases are in autistic spectrum disorder; just over 300%; and mental health difficulties; just under 300%. Although the numbers of students with disabilities in these two categories are quite small they are, along with multiple disabilities (which has increased by 55%), often those whose needs are most complex and challenging to meet.

The other group of disabled students I want to draw attention to are those with sensory impairments: hearing and visual. Students in these categories are most frequently those for whom the cost of meeting their needs can go well beyond the DSA allowances, because the cost of signers and of having material transcribed into other formats can be very significant for some programmes. Whilst numbers of students with visual impairments is steady the numbers with hearing impairments has increased by 48% over the five year period. To date it has been possible to cover the cost of meeting the needs of these students, through their DSA allowances and our budgets.
Total numbers of students seen by the Open Door Team in 2011/12 was 1631, an increase of 25% on the previous year. For the first time they are able to break down initial appointments by year of student (see Open Door Team management report) and show a spread across years, undergraduate and postgraduate which is roughly proportionate to the overall student population.

In Autumn 2012 we introduced a new measure; identifying the next available appointment in each of the main services areas within Student Support Services that operates an appointment system; welfare information, open door team, dyslexia support, disability support and immigration advice. The measure is typically taken around midday on the Monday of each week. The results from week three of term 1 (T3) through to the end of that term are shown in figure 3.

Whilst this simple measure does not take account of student availability, it does provide a measure of minimum waiting times and also of workload for those providing each service. It is intended to use this to develop a service standard once an academic cycle has been tracked. At this stage it looks like a five working days (or better) target for 90% of the year should be realistic, if challenging.

Use of service user evaluation & feedback data

User evaluation and feedback data are utilised in a number of ways to inform service improvements and development plans. In September 2012, at our annual all-staff away-day, some time was spent considering what it is most important for us to measure in order to know that our services are meeting the needs of students. We went on to agree a number of new ways we would consider monitoring and evaluating our services and this will form the basis of an evaluation report for the incoming Director.
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Business challenges and opportunities

The context has changed little from last year, with the three main factors creating uncertainty remaining the global recession, changes to the UK fee regime for Higher Education and continued changes to immigration rules. In Student Support Services each of these creates challenges that have a direct impact on our work, examples of which include:

- The detailed work required to be ready to administer the home student package of fee waivers, accommodation bursaries and other awards to new home (English) undergraduate students, as set out in the University Access Agreement: www.york.ac.uk/student-support-services/student-financial-support-unit/access_agreements/

- The more complex requirements that UKBA has for visa holding students requires greater care in communication about these students between departments, Registry Services and the Immigration Advice Team, now located entirely in SSS.

- The NHS mental health provision in the York area has been under increased pressure, with significant reductions in provision. As one consequence, it has been harder for students to access secondary support services, which may in part explain increasing numbers of students seeking support from the Open Door Team.

- The planned introduction of a charter to cover the provision of non-medical help for students with disabilities by October 2012.

In addition to (and in part as one result of) these more externally driven changes, we found ourselves facing other challenges, for example:

- The funding to appoint an additional member of staff in SFSU to administer the bursary package and an additional practitioner in Open Door in response to increased student uptake, meant we would have insufficient office accommodation by September 2012. This led to the option of two empty shop units in Market Square being refurbished for use by SSS.

- The agreement of a plan to restructure postgraduate research student administration required planning for a separation of PGR and PGT scholarship administration and preparation to take on PGT special cases administration by Autumn 2012.

Key opportunities during the year have included:

- To custom design the space in the Market Square units to provide a suitable space for our front of house team and the advisory services. Whilst being in three buildings is far from ideal, having a well designed space in a much more visible location is a significant improvement.
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- The conversion of the University email and diary system to Google Applications has allowed us to put all adviser and practitioner (and other) diaries onto Google and for receptions in the SSHub and in Sally Baldwin to make various types of appointments.

- Jill and Sharmila were able to take part in the visit to a number of European Universities, undertaken by a group of colleagues across the Academic Registry, and feed their insights into the SSS team.

- Funding within the Retention and Success strand of the Access Agreement has enabled the additional dyslexia tutor post, created in 2011 on a fixed term basis, to be made up to a continuing post.

- Having assessed the more stringent monitoring and reporting requirements for the non-medical help charter the decision was made to contract out the provision of non-medical help and Neuropartners were chosen as the preferred provider.

- Resource within Registry Services development team became available to support the development of an on-line administration of student medical self-certification and for case recording of special cases within SITS.

Plans and developments

The main priorities for 2012-13 are:

1. Consolidate the significant changes already described:
   - the opening of the Student Support Hub in Market Square;
   - the Open Door Team and Student Financial Support Teams exchanging locations;
   - changes in SFSU with Caryn Douglas moving to Registry Services as the first stage in forming the postgraduate research student administration team and Emily Smith arriving, primarily to work with Russell and others on the new home student financial support package;
   - Neuropartners taking on the non-medical help portfolio;
   - Sandra Grieves moving to us from Registry Services as the PGT special cases administration was transferred.

2. Navigate the period of transition as I leave and the new Director is appointed.

3. Complete the current IT projects and the options appraisal for online case recording, in collaboration with the Colleges.

4. Update SSS publicity materials in summer 2013 to reflect recent changes.
Equality matters

We have started impact assessing our policies and we were involved in impact assessing the 2013/14 Access Agreement, with that document amongst those sent to OFFA as part of the University’s successful submission. It has been frustrating not being able to progress our plans to analyse usage data by protected characteristics, due to the lack of electronic case recording. We were involved in advising two departments about their support for students who declared that they are pregnant.

Additional information

In summer 2011 the Open Door Team was shortlisted the Times Higher Exceptional Student Support Award and although not the eventual winners the experience of going to the awards ceremony was a memorable one for all concerned. Later in the year, the Open Door Team was awarded a Vice Chancellor’s Gold Award for promoting inclusivity.

I want to finish by expressing my thanks to all my colleagues in Student Support Services, who consistently work hard and to high personal and professional standards, in order to do the very best they can to support many of the students of this University. I am also grateful to all those colleagues across the University who have supported me, and the development of Student Support Services, since I took up this post in 2003.

Steve Page
Director Student Support Services
January 2013