Vision for service excellence

Our vision is to provide a 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 all members of particular groups of students, for example international student orientation and immigration advice, undergraduate bursary and postgraduate scholarship 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 the services need to 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 using the service 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

In summer 2010 the Student Support Services (SSS) management team reviewed and updated the strategic plan it had agreed twelve months previously. The plan was presented in the 2010 Student Support Services annual report to Student Services Committee under the heading ‘Key Areas of Work’ and the main strands are as follows:

1. Put in place software that will provide casework management tools and web-enabled student interactivity across SSS. The purpose of this is to facilitate increased collaborative working across SSS, standardise the collection of management information data and offer students greater interactivity, for example appointment booking on line. We were working with the software company GTI to develop a brand new Student Support component of the Target Connect software currently in use in the Careers Service. The Open Door Team piloted the software, with mixed success, but when we came to rolling it out across SSS it became clear that some of the difficulties with the functionality of the software significantly undermined key operations and we took the difficult decision to cease using the software and explore alternative solutions.
2. Review the provision of administrative support across SSS, in particular the role and scope of the Administrative team based within Student Support Office. Jill Ellis (Deputy Director of SSS) led this review and proposed a structure that has been agreed by the management team. Work is now underway to define the role and scope of the Administrative team in SSO.

3. Branding of a single Student Support Services. Our vision of Student Support Services remains that it will be located in one building, with a single reception providing swift access to first line triage-style assessment of the needs of each student presenting for assistance. There were proposals to enable this to happen in the context of a wider relocation plan for Academic Registry and we planned to update our publicity material accordingly. Unfortunately the building plans did not come to fruition, but some progress has been made, for example increased reception functionality in Sally Baldwin Buildings, Block B, the move to this single annual report, the development of a triage system in Welfare Advice and a more consistent use of template and integrated colour scheme in publicity materials. In addition, the Student Support Handbook was restructured, in consultation with YUSU, to a thematic approach, in line with the University’s student web-pages.

4. Develop a quality strategy for SSS, which includes feedback and evaluation mechanisms. For 2010/11 work on this strand was focused on our involvement in the AMOSSHE Value and Impact project, for which York was one of four pilot institutions. This work was specifically focused in three areas: dyslexia support and undergraduate bursaries in SSS and also in the Maths support project in ASO.

We had identified five other areas for improvement, which were lower priority for 2010/11: student communication, on-line applications, staff progression, developing our workshops and exploring automation of student check-in for appointments.

In addition to these plans we were heavily involved in a process review of the admission of students with a disability, which produced some useful improvements. The flow diagrams for the admission of undergraduate and postgraduate student are available at: www.york.ac.uk/student-support-services/disability-services/

2010/11 Action Plan

The action plan used by the Management team summarising milestones, targets, lead and progress is set out below in table 1. Overall progress was disappointing, due to eventual failure of Target Connect software to meet necessary specification and the cancellation of the planned move, around which much of the ‘rebranding’ was structured. However good progress was made in the development of a central administrative function and our part in the national Value and Impact project.
### Description | Milestones | Lead | Target | Progress |
--- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
**Target Connect** | Staff use in ODT & SFSU | Sharmila | * | Done |
| Staff use in SSO | Sharmila | Summer 2011 | attempted – software failed for reception use. |
| Management Information | Steve | Feb 2011 | agreed, reporting tool limited |
| Staff use in Dis. Services | Sharmila | Summer 2011 | partially achieved |
| Student online booking | Sharmila | Autumn 2011 | stage not reached |
| Identify administrators | | | | |

**Admin review** | New JDs | Jill | Feb 2011 | key JD completed, lengthy HERA process |
| Service description for SSS admin | Jill | Summer 2011 | to be completed |

**Branding: one SSS** | Single Annual report | Steve | Feb 2011 | postponed while format agreed |
| One building | Team, Penn for access | Sept 2011 | Proposed move fell through |
| Room spec for workshops | Anne | * | Consensus: 15 people; comfortable space. Eqiv to triple office. |
| New branding info | Team | April 2011 | some done |
| Badges for all SSS staff | Jill | * | Done Sept 10. |

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**Evaluation & Impact** | Amosshe pilot decision | Steve & Jill | * | in the pilot |
| Plan for 10/11 evaluation and impact | Steve, Jill, Sharmila | * | achieved. |
| Appoint intern(s) | Jill, Sharmila | * | achieved |
| First term data report | Jill, Sharmila | * | achieved |

*Table 1 – Action Plan*
Data on service usage

There is a considerable volume of service usage data gathered in course of the year and rather than reproduce it here, the detail for specific services can be found on our web-pages at:

www.york.ac.uk/student-support-services/annualreports/

In most areas there is a steady increase in usage, roughly in line with the increases in student numbers, however there are some exceptions, which are worthy of note. In addition, I will report for the first time on special circumstances car parking, although we have undertaken this is work for many years.

One of the very disappointing consequences of the difficulties we experienced with the target Connect software has been that the planned management information reports have not been created. Therefore, we are still recording information in a somewhat inconsistent way, which does not always readily yield the most important intelligence.

Students with Specific Learning Difficulties (SPLD)

We have seen significant decreases in the numbers of screening, with a total of paper and on-line screenings of 207 in 2009/10, down to 138 in 2010/11. There has also been a significant reduction in the number of full psychological assessments from 209 in 2009/10 to 116 in 2010/11. Screening is in-house and we can make the capacity to respond to demand, so we do not have identified reasons for this reduction. The reduction in assessments could be linked to two factors: students having to pay for the assessment (less than 10% was funded through ALF) and a reduction in the number of assessments on offer because the assessors could not meet the required turn-around time for reports.

The other significant change is the number of support worker hours (note-taking, amanuensis, etc) for students with SPLD; up from roughly 370 for the previous two years to 1318; a massive 250% increase.

- We are considering how to gather further data to help us understand these shifts.
- We have funding, currently for one year, for a dyslexia tutor who is providing screening and study skills support.
- The protocols for financial assessments for students undertaking psychological assessments are more generous this year.
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Student ‘special circumstances’ car parking

One little known area of our work I would like to highlight this year is the assessment of student applications for ‘special circumstances’ car parking permits. There is a well-articulated policy defining the categories of students who can have a parking permit: http://www.york.ac.uk/admin/estates/transport/parking/permits/students.html

The permits we assess are those putting forward some form of exceptional need. The process is rigorous and based on principles of fairness and consistency. Due to the pressure on parking places on campus we have to be careful not to create precedents that open car parking up to significantly larger numbers of students.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>year</th>
<th>applications</th>
<th>approved</th>
<th>% approved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009/10</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010/11</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2: applications and approvals*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>number</th>
<th>% of approved</th>
<th>reason</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>main carer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>compassionate with dependants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>disability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>medical/compassionate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>medical</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>entitled under normal regulations</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 3: 2010/11 reasons for approvals*

Table 2 indicates a modest but significant increase in applications and refusals, whilst table 3 evidences that we are using this mechanism to support students with medical conditions, disability or caring responsibilities.

**Open Door Team**

The most striking statistic in the data from the Open Door team is the global number of student seen in each of the last 3 years, as set out in table 4.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>2008/09</th>
<th>2009/10</th>
<th>2010/11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>number</td>
<td>727</td>
<td>911</td>
<td>1310</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 4: students seen by the Open Door team*

This level of increase is concerning, but is in part explained by the changes to the University’s mitigating circumstances policy.

It is very pleasing that funding for an additional member of staff for the Open Door team is included in the recently announced additional University spend to enhance the student experience.
Special Cases Administration (undergraduate)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Cases</th>
<th>% increase</th>
<th>Undergraduate Academic Appeals</th>
<th>% increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2007/08</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>-45.84</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>2.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008/09</td>
<td>358</td>
<td>-3.5</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>-5.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009/10</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>-20.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010/11</td>
<td>466</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>85.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5: Undergraduate special cases overall five year statistics

Within the figures for appeals in table 5 lies evidence (through a bulge in numbers of appeals moving from 2009/10 into 2010/11) of the difficult situation the current Special Cases Administrator inherited when she first took up her role. Largely through her endeavour this was successfully addressed during 2010/11. We now have better resourced, more streamlined and effective set of processes for undergraduate special cases, operated by the administrator and her deputy.

Use of service user evaluation & feedback data

Evaluation by service users is a very important quality measure, although data needs to be treated with care. For example user surveys with 15-30% response rates may be representative, but they may not. Nevertheless, service user evaluations have been undertaken in the following areas in 2010/11:

- Disability Services
- Immigration Advice Service
- International orientation (Feedback section in report)
- Open Door Team

In each case the relevant team or member of staff assesses the feedback to look for patterns to improve the service or event for future years and uses that information when formulating their own development plans.

In addition, in 2010/11 Undergraduate Bursaries and Dyslexia support were evaluated in greater depth through the Value and Impact project. There is a report of the project available, although this is focussed on the methodology and process rather than the specific results. For a copy, please email:

student-support@york.ac.uk.
From the bursary strand it was possible to feed into the Access Agreement that there was a shift from a strong preference for bursaries at 2010 fee levels but a more balanced view about fee waivers and bursaries at higher fee levels. It also highlighted some communication issues as many students did not understand the source and reason for the awards they were receiving.

From the dyslexia strand the emotional impact upon the student of being given a dyslexia diagnosis came through as a significant issue and this has been taken into account in the way in which post assessment briefings are carried out.

**Business challenges and opportunities**

The University is operating in a period of significant uncertainty, with three main factors impacting: 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 these changes include:

- Changes in the RCUK funding of student scholarships, particularly at PhD level and this requires different responses to bidding processes, including greater requirements for collaboration between HEIs with collaborative doctoral training centres emerging as a consequence.

- In 2012/13 we anticipate a significant increase in workload in the area of bursary administration, with the introduction of a 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/](http://www.york.ac.uk/student-support-services/student-financial-support-unit/access_agreements/)

- The recession creates financial pressure for some students as anticipated family support erodes through loss of parental jobs, or the students’ own plans for part-time working are harder to realise. There are also secondary pressures, for example to perform well and achieve a high degree classification in order to be able to compete in a restricted employment market.

- Post-study work visas are due to end in April 2012, the precise timing still uncertain so it remains difficult to advise a large cohort of international students.

In addition to these more externally driven changes we find ourselves facing other challenges, for example:

- There is a tranche of PhD students needing to apply for an additional visa for their writing up period, which has increased the load on immigration clinics and appointments.

- Student numbers requesting appointments with the Open Door Team has risen
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by 44% between 2009/10 and 2010/11.

- Significant increases in the number of students coming forward for dyslexia support sessions.

- A year on year increase in the number of students diagnosed with autistic spectrum conditions. The social relationship component of these conditions and sometimes understandably high levels of family involvement can add to the complexity of negotiating appropriate and realistic support arrangements.

Key opportunities during the year have included:

- Being one of four pilot HEIs involved in the AMOSSHE Value and Impact project, for which we employed interns to undertake studies linked to the undergraduate bursaries, dyslexia support and, in the Academic Support Office, the Maths Skills Centre.

- Involvement in the development of the University’s 2012/13 Access Agreement enabled us to influence the structure of the packages of bursary and fee waiver support, helping to avoid any unnecessary administrative burden this will create. We also participated in fruitful discussions about the most effective ways to target spend on retention and student support as part of the overall University financial contribution.

- The changes to scholarships funding and the University review of student funding led by PVC Jane Grenville, created the opportunity for a review of current scholarships/studentships administration. This has resulted in a project to develop an on-line student funding system led by SFSU that will provide a gateway for prospective and current students seeking information and applying for funds and an administrative system to streamline the process of administering these awards.

- The University was able to fund the purchase of a license for the Kognito training package, aimed at assisting staff and students to improving their skills and confidence in identifying students who may be experiencing significant mental health difficulties and need referral to the Open Door Team.
Plans and developments

In developing plans for 2011/12 and beyond it has been our priority to take forward the strands of the improvement strategy not yet successfully completed and add a realistic number of new emerging strands of priority development. Using this approach, our top priorities are:

1. **Put in place software that will provide casework management tools and web-enabled student interactivity across SSS.** Having taken the decision to stop using the GTi Target Connect module, we are undertaking a review of other packages available and will also be identifying which of our needs the new Google Applications can meet once we transfer over in February 2012.

2. **Rebranding Student Support Services.** In the coming few months will concentrate on re-launching publicity about the support we can provide to students, ready for the 2012 intake. With some additional accommodation planned for SSS by summer 2012, to create expansion space for SSS and Careers, we have an exciting opportunity to increase the profile of Student Support to the student community.

3. **Develop a quality strategy for SSS, which includes data collection, feedback and evaluation mechanisms.** We made some useful advances as part of the Value and Impact project last year and we have started to take that work forward, in particular in the area of student financial health, to develop routine evaluation mechanisms across SSS as well as ensuring greater consistency of data capture in different areas of SSS. Neither is simple given the variety and range of services we offer, but it remains important to achieve as much synergy on quality measures as possible.

4. **Capture policies and practices in each service area, to support and streamline future decision making.** This has emerged over recent months as something we want to do because as we grow and our work becomes more complex it is important that we capture the principles underlying decisions in all areas. We have well developed policy structures for some of our work; for example bursary awards, use of information and special cases processes; and this warrants expansion.

5. **Articulate a development plan for the support of international students.** This is a piece of work we have planned to take forward for some time and with the orientation programme now quite streamlined this is a good time to set out the development plan for the overall package of support specifically for international students.
6. **New and improved student financial support processes.** The ‘new’ includes putting in place the administration for bursaries, scholarships and the new hardship fund to which the University committed in its 2012/13 Access Agreement. ‘Improved’ principally refers to the student financial support project, which involves developing a portal for applicants and students to access information and apply for scholarships and bursaries, whilst in parallel supporting the underlying administration.

7. **Undertake the pilot and roll-out of the Kognito package to get maximum benefit from the investment in the license.** So far the pilot has had good feedback, with people finding the approach very engaging. The next stage is to package the software in order that colleagues can undertake it at their own desks.

8. **Student mental health policy.** Complete the drafting and undertake student consultation prior to presentation to Student Services Committee by summer 2012.

**Additional information**

This report covers only a proportion of the work undertaken by colleagues in Student Support Services and, for example, does not touch on the advice and guidance offered to academic colleagues or the sharing of our approaches with colleagues in other HEIs. This has also been a year of increased collaboration in a number of areas, including with colleagues in some academic departments, Finance and Student Recruitment and Admissions, with GSA and with YUSU, all of which has benefitted our work with students.

Finally it was very pleasing that the Open Door Team was shortlisted for the THE award for excellence in student support. Even though they did not win, the recognition this brought has increased the number of colleagues across the sector keen to learn about their work.

*Steve Page*
*Director Student Support Services*
*January 2012*