HIGHER EDUCATION **hefce**
FUNDING COUNCIL FOR ENGLAND

Supporting public accountability: presenting income and expenditure information to current students

In March 2014 HEFCE and the British Universities Finance Directors Group provided guidance to institutions on improving access to their financial information (Circular Letter 06/14). This is one of a set of five case studies published in January 2015 to illustrate the solutions adopted and how institutions developed these.

University of Southampton

The University of Southampton is one of the top fifteen research universities in the UK. It offers more than 200 degree programmes in 70 subject areas, as well as a broad range of taught postgraduate and doctoral research programmes. The University hosts 23,000 students across its seven campuses, including 5,000 international students representing 130 countries. The University has annual income of £480 million and, in 2012, opened its first overseas campus in Iskandar, Malaysia.

The University was keen to publish financial information for students as quickly as possible, so Sarah Pook, Director of Finance, worked with the President of the University of Southampton Students' Union (SUSU) to develop a series of pie charts and narrative text that explained how the University derives its income and how the institution spends it. This was accompanied by a series of 'did you know?' facts about the University's financial performance and was published on the staff and student web portal as well as on the University's external website.

The University was keen, however, to learn more about the financial information needs of its students. David Gilani, Student Engagement Officer within the University's communications and marketing team (and a former SUSU President), started by reviewing the findings of the original survey undertaken by the National Union of Students. While this was helpful, David and his colleagues wanted to gain a greater understanding of how University of Southampton students would like to see financial information presented.
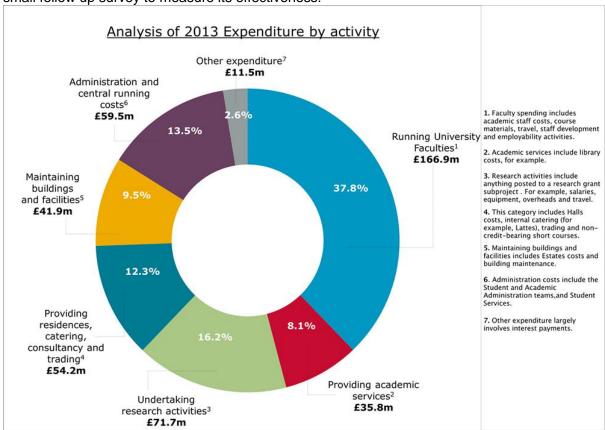
Having recently undertaken their own survey of current students, designed to explore their communications preferences, the University had a pool of over 600 current students who had agreed to provide further feedback. The communications and marketing team conducted a smaller survey of 100 representative students, asking them what financial information they would like to have, how they would like it to be presented and how the University's current approach to presenting financial information could be improved. The team supplemented the findings from this survey with a facilitated student focus group.

From its engagement with the student body, the University was able to gain valuable insight into how it can best communicate financial information. It learned, for example, that students would like information to be communicated graphically where possible, with narrative text reserved for the highlighting of key messages. Graphics should be supplemented with relevant data tables, so that students can look at the 'raw' data. And comparative data for prior year should be provided where possible.

The University's finance and communications and marketing teams are now working with the President of the students' union to refine their existing approach to communicating financial information to current students. This includes, at the request of students, exploring how the information could be presented interactively. The teams are also considering whether, and how,

such information could be communicated to prospective students, their advisors and their families.

Once the new financial information is ready, the University plans to publish it on the staff and student web portal. It will be highlighted through use of an icon on the main student page of the portal and will be the subject of a joint communications campaign between the University and the students' union. This might include promotion on the SUSU website, social media, physical signage on campus and coverage in student media. The University plans to use website analytics to track the number of students accessing the information and, possibly, to conduct a small follow up survey to measure its effectiveness.

Analysis of 2013 Expenditure by activity

Other expenditure[7]
£11.5m

Administration and central running costs[6]
£59.5m — 13.5%

Running University Faculties[1]
£166.9m — 37.8%

Maintaining buildings and facilities[5]
£41.9m — 9.5%

Providing residences, catering, consultancy and trading[4]
£54.2m — 12.3%

Undertaking research activities[3]
£71.7m — 16.2%

Providing academic services[2]
£35.8m — 8.1%

2.6%

1. Faculty spending includes academic staff costs, course materials, travel, staff development and employability activities.

2. Academic services include library costs, for example.

3. Research activities include anything posted to a research grant subproject. For example, salaries, equipment, overheads and travel.

4. This category includes Halls costs, internal catering (for example, Lattes), trading and non-credit-bearing short courses.

5. Maintaining buildings and facilities includes Estates costs and building maintenance.

6. Administration costs include the Student and Academic Administration teams, and Student Services.

7. Other expenditure largely involves interest payments.

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