

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 Leeds

The University of Leeds is a redbrick university located in West Yorkshire. Founded in 1904 but with a history dating back to 1831, it is a founding member of the Russell Group of research universities and of the N8 collaboration of research-intensive institutions in the North of England. With over 30,000 students and over 1,800 members of academic staff, the University of Leeds is one of the UK's largest higher education institutions. It has total income in excess of £580 million.

The University welcomed the Higher Education Funding Council for England's call for greater financial information targeted at students, as this was an area in which the institution itself was also keen to make progress. Consequently, the University used this new requirement as the catalyst to further its own aims in this area.

In response to the guidance, Peter Muller, Head of Management Accounting, and Ben Tregidgo, Management Accountant, started by reviewing in detail the findings of the original survey undertaken by the National Union of Students. They then used these findings to identify the nature and level of information that students might find helpful and informative.

Working with the University's communications team, Peter and Ben developed an initial series of charts showing key aspects of the institution's financial performance. This included overall income and expenditure, why a surplus is desirable and how this is used, and a breakdown of both income and expenditure to a more detailed level. While much of this information was already available in the University's financial statements, some further analysis of expenditure was undertaken in order to present a balanced picture of the institution's activities.

With these initial thoughts in place, Peter and Ben approached the Leeds University Union's Education Officer and Union Affairs Officer with a number of possible options for presenting financial information, to seek their feedback and to assess the extent to which the options would meet the needs of students. This prompted some valuable discussions.

The response of the students' union was positive and resulted in improvements to the way in which the information was presented and to how technical terms were explained. Some compromises were agreed over the level of detail of the financial information made available, though, due to the sensitive nature of increasingly detailed information.

The revised financial information is currently being reviewed internally, so that it can be approved and published on the University's website early in 2015. The University is also considering how the information can best be promoted to students and staff alike.

Reflecting on the process, Peter and Ben agreed that a significant element of the project had been the time spent analysing and presenting expenditure information in different ways, to reach the format that

would be most meaningful to students, but that this effort was worthwhile as it was key to the information being useful.

They are also keen to emphasise the extent to which the information that they have produced is not just a series of diagrams, but rather tells the 'story' of the University's finances. And it is this story that has guided how the financial information needs to be presented, rather than the other way around. While Peter and Ben started out thinking in terms of colourful infographics, they have found that clarity, simplicity and fidelity to the underlying 'story' are the keys to success.

