Delivering excellent campus service with passion, pride and professionalism

University of Kent
Having committed to continuous improvement to ensure the delivery of excellence across the whole range of campus services, the department is highly profitable and has a first class reputation for customer service and excellence widely recognised within the sector and beyond. It was the first organisation in Kent to achieve Investors in People gold status, and also one of the first in the higher education sector.

The sustained commitment to continuous learning and development of its people has led Kent Hospitality to achieve a number of awards and accolades. In 2014 the department was shortlisted for the Times Higher Outstanding Leadership and Management Awards (Thelmas).

The department is profitable and provides a significant annual contribution to university financial surpluses. It has also ensured continued investment in, and development of, the range of facilities provided for staff, students and conference guests. Crucially, as well as investment in facilities, there has been a matching commitment to invest in the development of the workforce so that each individual’s personal goals and ambitions are met wherever possible, to the benefit of the individual, the department and its customers.

The approach to public recognition of individual and team achievement is through a much-valued annual award ceremony, which has grown in size over the last few years. The ceremonies have been led each year by the deputy vice-chancellor who uses the occasion to highlight how Kent Hospitality strongly supports the university’s students in their journey towards graduation, acts in an ambassadorial role for so many of the university’s visitors and makes a strong financial investment in innovative campus facilities.
In the late 1990s Kent Hospitality appointed a personnel and training manager to equip its workforce with the necessary skills to deliver consistent, high quality customer service. There was a firm belief that sustained training and development would yield both personal and financial dividends. In pursuit of this a programme of nationally accredited courses was delivered to the entire staff of the department. This programme included basic skills in housekeeping and catering, numeracy, literacy and IT, as well as technical and professional qualifications. By 1999 the first cohort of staff to achieve certification was recognised in an awards ceremony, officiated by the university’s secretary and registrar.

Later that same year the department was awarded Investors in People status, with the recognition panel being particularly impressed by the commitment and enthusiasm at all levels within the department to the principles of Investors in People. By March 2000, 143 certificates had been distributed to staff involved in a wide variety of courses, including wine appreciation, emergency first aid, food hygiene and management development. At that time 68 staff had achieved NVQs (24% of the workforce) with some individuals registered for more than one qualification. One year later, Kent Hospitality had supported 16 staff through the Stepping Forward programme, 21 staff had participated in computer literacy training, 19 staff were qualified NVQ assessors, seven were advanced assessors, 54 staff had achieved Craft Trainer awards, five were accredited with National Licensee’s Certificate and one member of staff completed a postgraduate diploma in management studies.

The department also has a number of other indicators of success: daily and weekly attendance is rigorously monitored and benchmarked against national indicators for sickness absence; the 2014 Visit England audit awarded five stars to the best accommodation; the current ratings on booking.com and TripAdvisor are 8/10 and 4/5 respectively.

Kent Hospitality set out to provide the best of high street services on campus, offering market-leading facilities across all of its operations. A new standard was specified for student residential accommodation, with Kent offering the largest bedrooms in the sector along with the widest range of accommodation options. The catering outlets open from early in the morning until late at night, offer a wide variety of food and cater well for special dietary requirements. Kent’s latest facilities include an online lunch ordering service and an outlet that is the first in the sector to offer a late night and early morning campus-wide delivery service.

To improve the accommodation application process Kent Hospitality provides an online room viewing and selection facility. Once in their accommodation, students can view the availability of services, such as the laundrette, in real time online and, similarly, report any room defects online.
What impact did it have?

In UUK’s 2014 study The Impact of Universities on the UK Economy, the overall picture of 162 universities and colleges showed that 6% of university revenue comes from residence and catering operations. This income is not only derived from students and staff but also from providing conference and seminar facilities to other organisations. In contrast, Kent Hospitality contributes around 16% of the university’s income, of which its external conferencing revenue is around £4m, among the highest in the sector for a university without a dedicated year-round conference facility.

As training and development has increased, the department’s operating profit has risen and, after meeting loan charges and depreciation, Kent Hospitality has contributed over £10m to the university for the three years to July 2013. This is concurrent with achieving re-accreditation of Investors in People status in November 2004, reaching level two in 2007, and gold standard in 2010 and again in 2013.

The department has gone on to win the Group Travel Awards Best University Accommodation for Groups for the last seven years and the College and University Business Officers (CUBO) Best University Catering Service 2013, in addition to many other awards collectively and for individual members of staff.

Kent Hospitality operates a mystery diner scheme to evaluate staff and student opinion. This is supplemented by an annual undergraduate student survey which consistently indicates very high levels of satisfaction. An annual rent survey is undertaken among competitor institutions and fees are set to ensure that Kent’s offer to students remains among the best in the sector. More than 25% of the university’s rooms are priced below £4000, while at the same time offering one of the widest ranges of accommodation available.

The department’s annual awards ceremony brings together staff who have achieved success in learning, training and development. The awards range from Level 1 NVQs in all areas of hospitality activity to both undergraduate and postgraduate degrees and accountancy qualifications. The event means much to the participants and is highly motivational.

Staff retention is high and the department is able to recruit high quality staff due to the excellent working environment. In the most recent staff survey (February 2013), completed by 62% of the workforce, 93% responded that they understood how their work makes Kent Hospitality successful, 96% were proud of the work they do and 96% believed that they work hard as a team to provide good service to their customers and that their development is contributing to better customer experiences.

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Lessons learned

This is a commercial approach which could be adapted for a range of HEIs.

1. Commercial knowhow and financial acumen
   Many third party providers have entered the student accommodation market. In order to negotiate successfully in this arena, a team is required with a truly commercial approach, appropriate expertise and knowledge of student requirement. This skillset will deliver value for money to the university sector.

2. Shared commitment to the investment of development and training of staff
   This needs to be seen as a crucial investment and not a nice-to-do. There is a clear link between a well-trained, committed and knowledgeable workforce and profitability.

3. Senior level involvement and recognition
   The support of the most senior staff in the university at the department’s recognition events sends a strong message to the workforce that their activities are fully recognised and their contribution valued. The director of the department meets quarterly with staff in their workplace to update on projects, business plans and future agendas.

4. All staff understand the importance of their contribution
   This is tested in many ways: through staff questionnaires, through audit by the Investors in People external assessor, through the university’s appraisal process, the annual financial reward structure, specific award for consistency in excellent customer service and the termly Personal Responsibility in Delivering Excellence award. There are regular away days for middle and senior managers, who are all engaged in the annual business objectives of Kent Hospitality. In addition, there are termly meetings between senior management and trades union representatives to share current agendas and disseminate information.

5. Learn from outside the sector
   The senior management team regularly engages with external facilitators to update skills and knowledge, as well as sharing best practice with national organisations such as Virgin Atlantic, UPP, Disney and legal and accounting firms. Frequent updates on employment law, accounting practice, marketing and social media developments form part of the annual business cycle.

“The ceremony means a lot – it shows your hard work throughout the year, and demonstrates to others what you’ve achieved. Without the training in place I wouldn’t have progressed, but I was encouraged to go further and the training has helped my personal and family life.”

Chris Scrutton, Assistant Housekeeping Manager

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New case studies will follow this launch series, so please check back on our website for the latest resources.
About the case studies

This series of case studies has been developed from the work of the Leadership Foundation and partners for the report ‘Efficiency, Effectiveness and Value for Money’ led by Professor Sir Ian Diamond and published by Universities UK in February 2015.

Partners in the ‘Diamond’ higher education workforce group (UCEA, UHR, Hefce, GuildHE, UUK and the Leadership Foundation) commissioned the case studies with support from the joint Hefce/Leadership Foundation Innovation and Transformation Fund.

Dr Lesly Huxley, director of membership and organisational development, leads the LF’s Innovation and Transformation Fund and our contribution to the HE workforce group. She said: “The leadership, development and commitment of people at all levels in higher education is fundamental to successful change and delivery of greater effectiveness in the core activity of our universities and colleges. These case studies and other work funded through the second phase of the Innovation and Transformation Fund show the importance of staff engagement and development in helping higher education institutions improve organisational performance.”

Gwen Wileman, LF Associate, who worked with the universities to develop this series, explained: “The case studies all provide powerful success stories and some real measures of impact on efficiency and effectiveness. However, the challenges of culture and complexity also come through loud and clear and there are many lessons to be learned and shared.”

About the Innovation and Transformation Fund

Acknowledging the central role of leadership in driving change, in 2012, together with Hefce, the Leadership Foundation initiated a £1m, UK-wide Innovation and Transformation Fund (ITF) to progress key themes of the first ‘Diamond Report’ on efficiency in higher education. Nine projects were funded and have now concluded.

Sir Ian Diamond was invited by the Department of Business and Innovation Skills to lead a second phase of this work early in 2014, looking particularly at organisational change and development, the higher education workforce, estates and research assets, open data and evidencing efficiency.

In 2014-15, further joint investment totalling £500,000 is supporting the sharing of existing effective practice particularly in the leadership, management and development of the higher education workforce. A key to the Innovation and Transformation Fund is in unlocking and making best use of good practice. For more information go to: www.lfhe.ac.uk/ITF

About the Leadership Foundation

The Leadership Foundation is a membership organisation that delivers leadership development and consultancy advice to higher education institutions in the UK and around the world. The focus of the Leadership Foundation’s work is to improve the management and leadership skills of existing and future leaders of higher education.

The services provided include consultancy, leadership development programmes and events, including a major series of events for governors. This work is supported by a highly regarded research and development programme that underpins the leadership development programmes and stimulates innovation.

The Leadership Foundation has a small team of experienced leadership and organisational development professionals drawn from higher education, other parts of the public sector, and also from the private sector. Much of the Leadership Foundation’s work is delivered in partnership with the higher education sector and other partner organisations. www.lfhe.ac.uk

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