

# **York St John Students' Union**

## **Student Written Submission QAA Institutional Audit 2011**

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## **Introduction**

The student written submission endeavours to present the views and perceptions of York St John University from the perspective of its 5,500 students. York St John attracts students from a variety of different backgrounds and through the Students' Union we aim to support each and every one of our students. Our vision as a Union clearly sets out the agenda that we want to achieve for our members:

*"Broadening your mind. Making new friends. Advancing your career. Experiencing a different culture.*

*University can transform your life. So whatever you want to do with your time at York St John, we'll make sure you achieve it."*

Underpinning this are the five values of the organisation, chosen by our students, that are ingrained in all of the activities that we do for their benefit:

- *Fun*
- *Inclusive*
- *In touch and listening*
- *Value for money*
- *Working together*

## **Structure of the Students' Union**

The Students' Union is essentially run by three elected sabbatical officers who are supported by a staff team of 14 permanent members of staff working on either full time or term time based contracts and around 45 student staff recruited each year from the university population. It is important to us that students form the majority part of our staff team as they are able to input their views and make sure that the Union continues to meet the needs of its changing membership.

Democratically, the three sabbaticals are supported by a 15 member Union Council. These councillors are ordinary students who are elected by their peers to highlight issues for improvement that students have identified and scrutinise the work of the sabbaticals and staff.

As with other Students' Unions, the three Sabbaticals also act as trustees of the organisation, setting and maintaining the strategic direction of the Union whilst also ensuring appropriate oversight of the work of the staff team. The board of trustees also includes two student and two external trustees who are recruited through a formal selection process to ensure that they have the right set of skills and experiences to help the Union to continue to improve the work that we do.

Below are brief descriptions of the sabbatical and staff roles with responsibility for supporting students in pursuit of high academic student experience:

### **President**

The Presidents' key role is representing the students of York St John to external stakeholders including the local community, media and NUS. As well as being a Governor of the University, they also sit on a variety of University committees to represent the student opinion.

### **Vice President Education and Welfare (VPEW)**

The VPEW has a broad role which encompasses responsibility for implementation of welfare campaigns including supporting liberation campaigns. The VPEW takes strategic lead on implementing academic change as a result of student feedback and acts as the union's main point of contact for students to needing independent advice and support with academic issues.

### **Vice President Student Activities (VPSA)**

The VPSA takes a strategic lead on the all areas of student activity; including ensuring that students who volunteer to organise and take part in sports and societies, community and careers based volunteering, and charity fundraising through our Raise and Give group are given the best possible support. They also have responsibility of all of the entertainments co-coordinated by the Students' Union.

### **Academic Development Co-ordinator (ADC)**

Introduced this year, the Academic Development Co-ordinator (ADC) is an administrative position designed to support the work of the VPEW by coordinating the Faculty and Programme representative systems. The position often requires lots of direct contact with students when they are first presenting issues. Although this is the first year that the Students' Union has had a staff position specifically to deal with academic progression we have already seen great successes in helping faculties collate student opinion and facilitate change as a direct result of their feedback.

## **University's Relationship with the Students' Union.**

Here at the Students' Union we would acknowledge our good working relationship with our institution. We have excellent routes of communication to the most senior members of staff at the institution and our opinion is regularly sought to ensure that changes are compatible with continuing excellent student experience; this is also facilitated through monthly Student Union/Strategic Leadership Team meetings.

It is, however, apparent that work needs to be done to improve relations with areas of front line staff and the Union has as much a part to play to ensure that we prove both our worth and validity to these stakeholders. Similarly, in previous years we have had concerns about how far down the line

management structure our concerns have been filtered and whilst the senior staff have taken on board our concerns, change at the front line has been difficult to identify. In the last year however we have noticed more of an impact lower down the structure from our comments (particularly in the area of representational independence). This is extremely heartening and we hope that this will continue into the future.

Both parties acknowledge the difficulties that arise from being a small institution. With limited resources it is important that both sides engage actively in joint ventures to improve the student experience. These currently range from the university recruiting our Programme Reps and passing them to the Union for training and ongoing management and development, to the collaborative welfare campaigning we carry out around the areas of Housing and Money Management. Upcoming joint campaigns with the University's Careers Department mean that we can get more impact from shared resources and are leading us down a path of even greater collaboration.

It is widely felt that the student experience at York St John is a positive one and offers a uniquely friendly atmosphere where students can really develop strong working relationships with their tutors. Many of the common issues that arise from student feedback are the same as those found at many other institutions including timetabling and access to library texts, etc. The following report offers a balanced approach in identifying areas of concern as well as areas of excellent practice across the institution.

## **Methodology**

This document covers the following four areas of interest;

- Do students have a voice in the institution and is it listened to?
- What is the student experience as a learner like?
- Is it clear what is expected of students to be successful at York St John University?
- How accurate is the information that the institution publishes about itself, such as prospectuses, programme descriptors and advertisements? Has York St John lived up to your expectations?

In researching for this document a number of existing student surveys were examined as well as existing literature such as committee minutes, Students' Union forums, comments from our own "Tell Us What You Think" campaign and the University's Institutional Briefing Paper. A mixture of both qualitative and quantitative data will be represented and discussed in the in the report.

### **The National Student Survey (NSS)**

The results from the last 5 years of the NSS will be displayed to provide data with regards to the QAA's areas of interest and to highlight excellent areas and areas of concern for the Students' Union.

### **The Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES)**

We only have one years' worth of results from 2008 as it was decided by the institution to only engage in the survey biennially and so we missed out on the 2009 survey. As it has been decided that the survey will only run nationally every two years we are concerned that student opinion will now not be gathered until 2011. The relevant data from this survey is included, referring specifically to the QAA's areas of interest.

### **Student representation on University Committees**

Currently, the Students' Union has student representatives sitting on the following University Committees:

- Governing board
- Academic board
- Quality of Student Experience Committee
- Faculty Quality Enhancement Committees
- Programme Reviews and revalidations
- Timetable Strategy Group
- Strategic Planning & Resources Committee
- Scholarship and Prizes Committee
- Evaluation Sub Committee

# **Is it clear what is expected of students to be successful at York St John University?**

## **Introduction**

This section looks into the steps taken by the University to ensure that students are aware of what they need to do in order to be successful at a higher education level as well as at York St John.

## **Module outlines**

The University clearly provides students with a prescription of success through its module handbooks, which plainly outline mark weighting and allocation across the assessment. These handbooks can often become lengthy and it is our experience that students can become disinterested in reading them in their entirety, potentially missing key requirements or differences of the module.

Having identified this as a problem, we felt that a key task for the Academic Development Co-ordinator in their first months in post should be to focus on this area, specifically with reference to those courses that had scored most poorly on the NSS. In conjunction with the Students' Union, the Faculty of Arts have adopted a one page summary (like an insurance cover note) with the key information for each module so students are clear about their expectations & rights, as well as their responsibilities as a learner. Whilst it was envisaged that these would be used only with the three lowest scoring NSS courses, the academics within the faculty like the idea so much that they are rolling it out across all programmes within the faculty. We have already had ideas about how these can be further improved by including details of contact time and the expected private learning that students need to do to successfully complete their modules and we will be looking to implement these in the next academic year with the next courses we work with.

The timing as to when this information is received also needs consideration. Students are often first receiving module handbooks during the induction period – the first two weeks of the academic year. During this time students are assaulted with a massive amount of messages from all sources (academic, social and pastoral). At one of the recent University key work stream meetings for establishing the new strategic plan for York St John, one lecturer commented that part of the problem might be down to seeing induction as only this short period and that there might be value in considering an induction programme that encompasses the whole first term, running underneath the student's module commitments. We feel that this is an idea which is worth exploring to bring first year students up to speed with the expectations of University life and better prepare them for the following years.

All information relating programmes and their designed outcomes is also available online. However, this is not necessarily the easiest of information to find and potentially could be easier to access.

## Post Graduate Research students

In terms of the small number of YSJ has 26 research students (Arts 6, BS 3, E+T 5, HLS 12), 50% of these students completed the Postgraduate research experience survey (PRES):

The table below shows the PRES results from section 5

PRES section 5: Goals and Standards	2008 YSJ	2008 Aggregate	Small and Specialist Benchmark Group
I understand the required standard for the thesis	4.2	3.8	3.8
I understand the standard of work expected	4.4	3.9	3.8
I understand the requirements of thesis examination	4.0	3.7	3.6

Compared to national aggregates and those experiences of PG students at comparable institutions, it appears that the experiences at York St John is better. This is no small part due to development of research centre which fosters an excellently stimulating academic environment. However, it is of worth to note that as student numbers in this area increase and the facility is exceeds capacity it would be expected that this would have a negative impact on results. The Union are aware that this is something the University are taking very seriously in their progression towards Research Degree Awarding Powers, but the "hot desking" situation in the facility is already becoming a topic of discussion for current students, and we would urge the University to review provision

## Summary of University Expectations

We believe the University has every intention of giving students the guidelines for success, and effectively utilises opportunities to engage with students in order to communicate these guidelines to them. We would encourage that, in partnership with the students on the programmes, the University continually conduct reviews of the material provided per module to ensure that it is still fit for purpose and to identify areas of improvement that will ensure it matches with actual experience of the module.

## **What is the student experience as a learner or research student been like, considering opportunities for learning/ research and facilities available?**

### **Introduction**

This section will look at the student experience in relation to organisation and management of courses, Assessment and feedback, staff, and facilities. Throughout these sections results from the NSS will mainly be reported as well as direct quotes from students who responded to similar questions when their programmes underwent internal review. As York St John has 857 students studying on post graduate programmes this section will also present data from the Post Graduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) as well as a reference to the experiences of Post Graduate Research Students.

### **Organisation and management**

The table below shows the NSS results relating to Organisation and Management domain:

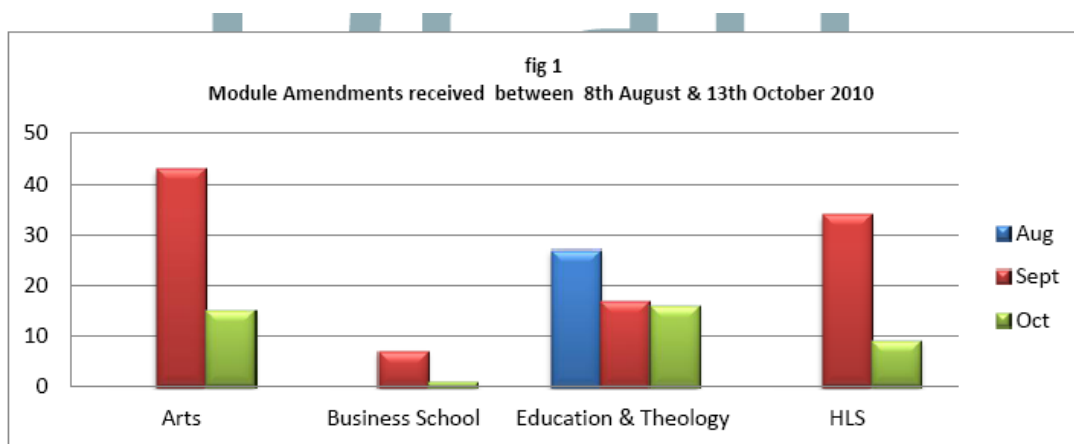
	13. The timetable works efficiently as far as my activities are concerned	14. Any changes in the course or teaching have been effectively communicated	15. The course is well organised and is running smoothly
2006	65	50	50
2007	70	57	61
2008	73	64	65
2009	72	67	66
2010	68	70	65

As a result of continuing issues in areas of organisation and management the Students' Union would like to acknowledge the work that is taking place in the Faculty of Arts to manage student expectations and improve the experience for its students. After the NSS planning meetings with the Deans the following two initiatives it is acknowledged will go far in improving expectations of students:

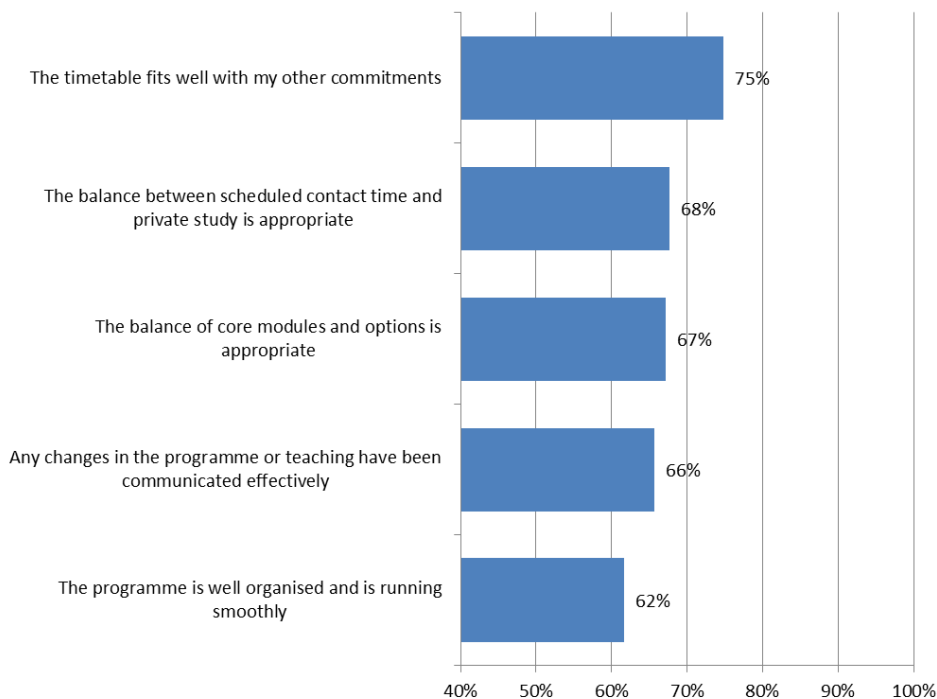
- Shared agreements about office hours/replying to e-mails
- Adjusting academic/administrative job roles and responsibilities to give clearer focus on student experience

The Students' Union supports the work done by the Timetable Strategy Group in terms of rolling over the timetable and also pulling forward the deadline for faculties to make their requests. We expect that these actions will be reflected in an improvement in student satisfaction with regards to their timetable.

However, it is important to note that these changes are still in their infancy. It is clear to us that there is a relationship between the number of changes and the timings of those changes made by faculties and overall student dissatisfaction with course organisation and management. While it is understood that production of the timetable is carried out over the summer months while many staff are on annual leave, it is important that the university put in place mechanisms to continually assess which programmes and faculties are making the most changes, and ascertain why these changes need to be made. As a result of this assessment, effective management processes must result in an improvement in initial programme requests and also in assessing the compatibility of the timetable to staff commitments. This whole process must be completed in plenty of time before term starts to minimise disruption to students.



The chart below shows PTES results for organisation and management of programme:



It is acknowledged that Joint Honours students face difficulties in relation to timetabling and course organisation due to the nature of their degrees. This year has seen the university drastically changing direction with regards to joint honours provision with them reducing the number of paired offerings a student can choose in order to create clearer study pathways. With this knowledge it has been decided to keep discussions around joint honours experience to a minimum as the University has taken in hand the differences in experience and has acknowledged that they currently do not have the capacity to effectively manage this diversity. Monitoring the experience of the students already on these courses has moved up the Students' Union's agenda to ensure the experience that these learners receive is maintained to its highest possible standard.

## Assessment and Feedback

The table below shows NSS results across Assessment and Feedback domain:

	5. The criteria used in marking have been clear in advance	6. Assessment arrangements and marking have been fair	7. Feedback on my work has been prompt	8. I have received detailed comments on my work	9. Feedback on my work has helped me clarify things I did not understand
2006	72	65	39	58	45
2007	75	70	46	65	57
2008	78	77	54	70	60
2009	79	78	57	73	60
2010	80	78	63	76	61

As with national trends assessment and feedback are some of our lowest areas of scoring. The student comments below highlight some of the areas that students at YSJ are concerned with:

*"Students stated assessment feedback has, in most cases, been both useful and constructive and helping to set targets for subsequent assignments. Feedback was reported to help students improve their own work by encouraging them to critique their own teaching and gain a better understanding of it. Feedback helped identify development areas further especially for upcoming essays. Only a few students commented on the seeming staff to student ratios and the time consuming nature of feedback and how this seemed to impact upon the feedback they received."*

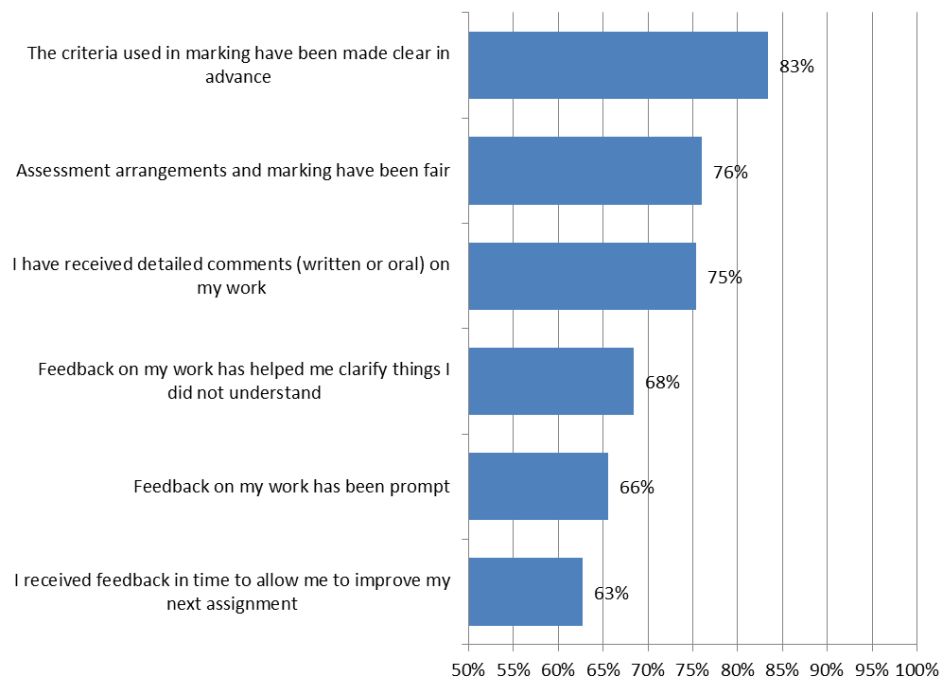
**Extract from Initial Teacher Education Student written submission**

*"The feedback that's offered has generally been very helpful and constructive. I think it would be useful to have word processed as a tutor's handwriting in some cases makes it very difficult to read. That aside, the feedback has been very beneficial in improving my work throughout the programme."*

**3<sup>rd</sup> Year Counselling student**

While it is acknowledged that the University has a 4 week feedback policy (3 weeks in the Business School), how well this is adhered to or communicated to students for accountability is debateable. It is recommended that four week feedback is clearly stated in module handbooks and also explicitly identified as being four working weeks to clarify potential delays over holiday periods. The Students' Union will be carrying out an exercise with our Programme Reps to sample feedback times on a range of modules across the year groups to monitor where compliance is lacking and will be presenting this as a report to the appropriate University committees before the end of this academic year. This will be an annual exercise from this year forward and we hope that this will help identify areas of weakness whilst also being able to commend those tutors who are prompt in feeding back to their students.

The chart below shows PTES results for assessment and feedback domain:



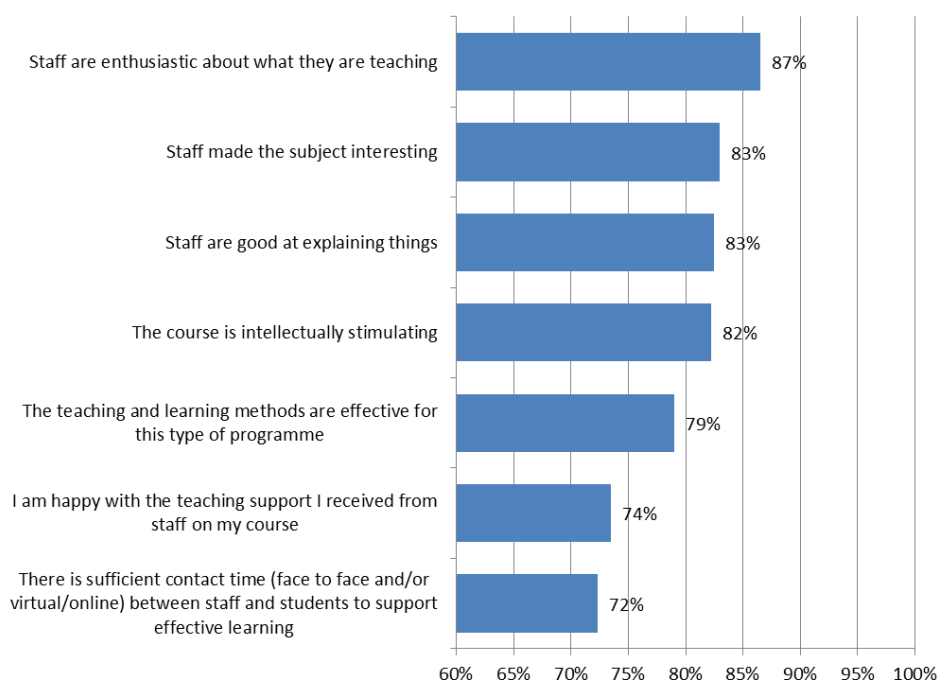
## Staff

The table below shows the NSS results relating to the Teaching domain:

	1. Staff are good at explaining things	2. Staff have made the subject interesting	3. Staff are enthusiastic about what they are teaching	4. The course is intellectually stimulating
2006	86	79	77	73
2007	89	84	86	78
2008	88	84	83	82
2009	87	83	83	78
2010	87	83	88	79

Overall students have a good level of satisfaction in relation to staff although we would hope that the University would be committed to continually encouraging staff engagement to keep these numbers high and rising. We are particularly pleased that students recognise the enthusiasm of staff. Any issues that arise from students relating to staff tend to be able to be attributed to communication issues relating to expectations about e-mail feedback and tutorial availability. This could be cleared up with explicit outlines of availability at the start of modules, in order to clarify any potential cross module differences.

The chart below shows PTES results relating to staff on the programme:



## Facilities

The table below shows the NSS results relating to the Facilities domain:

	16. The library resources and services are good enough for my needs	17. I have been able to access general IT resources when needed to	18. I have been able to access specialised equipment, facilities or rooms when needed to
2006	68	90	75
2007	68	89	72
2008	68	89	73
2009	68	79	71
2010	69	80	77

Perhaps one of the biggest issues of debate for students at York St John is the access to library facilities. Library access is not available 24 hours a day – book access finishes at 9pm on weekdays but there is still 24 hour access to computers in on the lower floors of the library. In 2009 a considerable dip in question 17's results can be seen. This is a reflection of the institution's decision to close the computer access at midnight. While reasoning behind this decision may have been sound (around cost against usage) it does not reflect the expectations of the students. After a Union led campaign this access was reinstated relatively quickly but had already affected those students completing that year's round of the NSS. It is still felt that work around access to library provision and usage of the space needs to be done. The recent introduction of the Learning Centre User forum led by the Students' Union with senior staff from both Library and IT services is a step in the right direction

*"I often find it difficult to work in Learning Centre. I know that there are specific quiet rooms but these aren't particularly welcoming to work in. I think that the quiet and group working zones in the library need re-visiting and policing better."*

**3<sup>rd</sup> Year Film and TV student**

With regards to individual discipline requirements experience is as varied as the requirements needed for the range of different courses at York St John. Over recent years the University has seen large capital investments in the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences. Many of the points of discussion are comparisons of facility provision at York St John against what is available at other institutions and this will only become a bigger issue as the fees market in Higher Education begins to develop. The University needs to ensure that it does not over sell the provision available here. This is more discussed in more depth under the expectations.

*"It's often hard to get rehearsal time in the dance studios. Even though we have two dance studio spaces, dance 2 really just isn't suitable, it's often used as a dumping ground and isn't really even big enough to be a warm up space. It can be really*

*frustrating especially around assessment time when everyone is trying to get into the same space."*

**3<sup>rd</sup> year Dance student**

*"Many of the student felt that there was sufficient provision and quality of technology with particular reference made to how the interactive whiteboard is great and how it very helpful to have a space to practice with it. A lot of the children's learning programmes are helpful too. Many of the issues identified concerning centralised provision. With one student identifying that it is often difficult to get computer space during the day as it is often booked up lessons so makes SOL work hard, when you don't live on campus so you don't want to have to stay too late because of the walk back to the accommodation. There were also some issues raised around accessing Athens outside of university making reading articles difficult."*

**Initial Teacher Education Review Extract**

*"Overwhelmingly, another area of great satisfaction with all respondents reporting that facilities are very good and that it is easy to search for information. Particularly of note is that many reported that they enjoyed learning environment many also commented on the IT department been extremely helpful and supportive."*

**Business School collated response when asked how good the information technology facilities available to learners were.**

**PGR students**

The table below shows the PRES results across the 6 different domains

	<b>Section</b>	<b>2007 Aggregate</b>	<b>2008 Aggregate</b>	<b>YSJ 2008</b>
1.	Supervision	3.93	4.02	4.50
2.	Skills development	3.86	3.96	4.25
3.	Infrastructure	3.62	3.10	4.31
4.	Intellectual climate	3.40	3.45	3.65
5.	Goals and standards	3.80	3.79	4.18
6.	Thesis examination	3.96	4.01	N/A

Students are invited to sit on the Research Degrees Sub Committee and make active contributions to this group about how their experience can be improved with regards to their very specific needs.

Infrastructure	2008 YSJ	2008 Aggregate	Small and Specialist Benchmark Group
I have adequate access to the equipment necessary for my research	4.2	3.8	3.8
I have a suitable working space	4.5	3.7	3.6
There is appropriate financial support for research activities	4.1	3.4	3.3
There is adequate provision of	4.5	3.8	3.7

computing resources and facilities			
There is adequate provision of library facilities	4.5	3.9	3.8
I have the technical support I need	4.2	3.7	3.7

Once again York St John PGR students seem to report high levels of satisfaction with regards the infrastructure surrounding them to achieve in their learning environment.

## **Summary**

It is acknowledged that this is a period of change and transition for the University, both in terms of the landscape of Higher Education nationally and also the changing leadership within the University. As a Union we believe that the senior management of the University are proactively attempting to tackle the negative areas identified through students' feedback although there is still a lot of work to be done to ensure that students are happy with their teaching and learning experience.

## **Do students have a voice in the institution and is it listened to?**

### **Representation**

The University and the Students' Union work collaboratively to deliver the Programme Representative system. University staff are responsible for recruiting reps at which point the Union takes over their training. Across the institution this is done in a variety of ways; some programmes undertake elections and while others ask for volunteers. I believe this in turn reflects in the engagement of those reps.

As mentioned in the introductory sections of this report student representatives sit on the following university panels:

- Governing board
- Academic board
- Quality of Student Experience Committee
- Faculty Quality Enhancement Committees
- Programme Reviews and revalidations
- Timetable Strategy Group
- Strategic Planning & Resources Committee
- Scholarship and Prizes Committee
- Evaluation Sub Committee

### **Other methods of gathering the student voice**

#### **Programme Evaluation Reports**

Students are encouraged to complete after module evaluation forms which are used to inform Programme Evaluation Reports (PER). While this is a very thorough approach it is felt that this may result in low response rates as students begin to experience survey fatigue. The Students' Union hasn't yet looked into the response rates of these questionnaires and any differences since the process moved online for students to complete at their leisure, although it is an area that we intend to investigate once our other academic reports are established and being delivered in a systemic, annual format.

It is anecdotally reported that students feel that they are disengaged with the process as any changes made as a result of their feedback are often not reported back to these students, and unless they are repeating a module they are unlikely to see the benefit of their suggested changes.

It would be useful for Faculties to publish a brief "You said, We did" style section in each of the module handbooks that can directly link back to the changes that have come about as a result of student feedback. While there may be some reluctance to add yet more information to handbooks, it is felt that a few bullet points may go some way to showing that student input is

valued and may also help explain why certain decisions have been made to alter modules. This information could also be placed on the Moodle forums for these modules as a document that changes each year so, whilst the previous students might not see the changes, current and upcoming students can see that feedback does result in improvements being made.

### **Union Strategic Review**

In setting the new strategic direction of the Students' Union, a large scale survey of the student body was taken. Whilst this threw up a number of areas of interest, one area identified was the dissatisfaction of some students with regards to some of the decisions that have been made by the University in relation to facilities development and campus building projects. While sabbaticals involvement is often sought in later stages of developments, it is felt that a more consultative period with the student body would be useful. We are delighted that the Vice Chancellor has recently suggested that focus groups or feedback panels of students be created to provide input into suggested University facility departments and we look forward to supporting the running of these groups. We will be including these in the next draft of the Union's Strategic Plan.

This review also echoed concerns that students have raised through the NSS and other feedback mechanisms that are covered elsewhere in this document and will therefore not be repeated here.

### **Involvement in internal reviews**

Since the academic year 08/09 student representatives have been invited to sit on internal reviews and the Students' Union has been asked to submit independent student written submissions on the programmes. During this time the Union has completed documents for the Counselling and Initial Teacher Education review/revalidations and at the time of writing we are involved in the Business subject review. This has been a developmental process and through collaboration with academics we have seen the student written submission for these reviews develop from 6 questions asked around the National Student Survey domains to 19 questions more specifically targeted around quality assurance and areas of interest for the Quality Assurance Agency. We believe this is an excellent way of programmes gathering independent evidence and want this to continue into the future.

### **Programme Representatives and the Student Voice**

It is our target that each programme will have at least 2 reps per year per programme. However, this varies across the institution relating to course size and engagement. The effectiveness of our Programme Rep system is so different across disciplines that it leads us to question its effectiveness.

We acknowledge that there are pockets of excellence as well as areas for development. In the main Programme Reps provide effective feedback and we haven't received any complaints from Faculties or Programme Leaders about the commitment or appropriateness of comments from our

representatives. Much of the work needs to be done around communication between the Students' Union meetings with reps and the appropriate staff within programmes. We have a baseline understanding of how reps interact within each programme but have only just this year begun to get any real sense of their effectiveness. This has only been possible through the introduction of specific staff resource (the Academic Development Co-ordinator post) as without this the scale of the scheme has been too great for any party on either the Union or University side to see it in its totality. It is our intention (as laid out in our Strategic Plan) that the complete Programme Representative system will be reviewed from top to bottom in the academic year 2011-12.

Where we can see direct success is at the Faculty Representative level. These students, elected from the Programme Reps within their faculty, sit on Faculty Quality Enhancement Committees to provide overall feedback. They act as a collection point for all Programme Rep feedback and are actively engaged with the Deputy Deans within their faculties. Furthermore, they produce regular After Meeting Evaluation reports which are published on the Students' Union's website and promoted via our social networks to feedback to students the outcomes of these meetings.

The individual student voice outside of the Programme Rep structure is also highly important. In the recent Initial Teacher Education review students were asked if they felt like they had the opportunity to make a positive change on their course. The following examples are specific to that programme but are broadly representative of the types of discussion that have occurred in other courses and highlight nature of student voice in relation to affecting change on programmes:

- Many reported that they felt they did have the ability to affect change if needed but in many instances they thought the course was good as it was, and that group work really facilitated positive engagement and discussion around varying opinions. However, when pressed some very specific points came out with some students questioning the course content changing and so it may be worthwhile explaining the feedback that lead to the changes.
- Some students were concerned in the preparation to the real school experience and so the programme may want to look into a peer system where students in years above could mentor first years about the experiences to relieve some of the apprehension around uncertainty of what to expect around placement.
- Students acknowledged the value of the student reps and were pleased they could engage with this on any level they wanted to. Issues around placement were raised again with perceived late notice of allocation impacting upon experience. Equally, staff were praised for individual work with some of the respondents with one reporting that the tutor was helping them in *"realising my strengths and weaknesses and helping me to enhance and personalise my placement experience."*

- Some students expressed concern that any input suggested for change would not be responded to quickly enough to have any impact on their experience. While we appreciate the timely nature that some processes require for change, it can be un-motivating for students to continue with engagement if they do not see the benefits:

*"No I don't think so because everything is already in a set pattern told to every student in advance so how someone can bring change even when he is not involved in it."*

**2nd year History Student**

This final comment echoes the points made in the Programme Evaluation Reports section of this document.

**Subject reps**

Subject Reps is a new initiative trialled in the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences (HLS) in 2009/10. The premise of this added layer of representation was to acknowledge the differences that occur between programme and faculty level especially in HLS where subjects ranged from sports studies to Physiotherapy. Staff in the faculty reported that that the subject rep appears to be a valuable role, with some clarification needed around which year subject reps were to be from or whether the role offers enough opportunity for part time students to get involved.

**Areas of excellence**

A specific example of good practice in gathering the student voice comes from the Sports subject area. Last year, they identified issues within the feedback they were getting from the research methods modules. Using an idea from the Faculty of Arts, they set up a dialogue day where students from the course were invited to an off-site event to discuss in more depth the student perspective of these modules to try and develop them to make them more relevant to the student need. While this was an expensive endeavour I know students equally got as much out of the session as staff did and hopes are high that this will be reflected in a more positive response to this how this year's research method modules are run.

**Isolated incidents**

Whilst in general the student voice is seen as being positive in improving students' academic experiences, there have been a few incidents that have highlighted the occasional discrepancies between what the University might believe about their engagement with the student voice and the actual reality of engagement at the ground level.

Last year a student in a representative role e-mailed a lecturer offering positive and constructive feedback and suggesting a way forward to improve experience for all the students on that module. They were greeted with an email response from the Head of Programme that was personally addressed to him and into which of all his peers on the module had been courtesy

copied into. In this response he was questioned in a forthright manner about the suitability of his e-mail and its content. This resulted in the rep standing down from their post and us as a Union having real difficulty filling the place as fellow classmates feared similar consequences if they were to suggest feedback and the outcome that such a situation may have on their degree.

In 2009/10 the Students' Union ran a Programme Rep campaign with the tag line "What's Wrong with your course". This was met with a plethora of e-mails from academic staff from one faculty in particular questioning the appropriateness of suggesting something may be wrong with a course. We believe that students have a right to say what they feel is wrong with their course and be actively involved with their lecturers in producing solutions to these problems. Furthermore, we believe that no matter how good a course is, students and lecturers should be looking to continually improve the learning experience. Communication of a similar nature was also received during the 2010/11 Programme Rep campaign despite the adaptation of the campaign to run with a tag line of "What's Great about your course" alongside the original slogan. This was disappointing and suggests that once again there are certain areas with the university that are very eager to hear the positives but are fearful of any criticism.

Most recently during the Initial Teacher Education internal review, it was noted by the student representative sitting on the panel that the Programme staff appeared very defensive towards anything that may have been perceived as negative, whether it was obviously critical or not. The Students' Union were asked to submit a report as to the students' experience on this course. The report identified no areas of real concern for the Students' Union and, as an independent organisation, we were pleased with the provision they were offering on the programme. However, back room discussion about the reports contents been academic staff and its authors and an open dismissal of the report on the review days caused real concern to us as it seemed disproportionate to the actual content of the report. This raised queries by both our programme representatives and our sabbatical officers as to how feedback is encouraged and handled at a local level.

These examples are given not to name and shame the individuals responsible but to demonstrate that whilst there is excellent collaborative work developing, there are still areas for improvement within the University. As we approach a new era for Higher Education it will be important for the University to truly engage with its students and make them equal partners in creating the student experience and not merely in some instances offering lip service. It is hoped that the new senior management team at York St John will be able to develop an improved culture that proactively seeks and accepts constructive criticism and uses it to improve an already uniquely excellent student experience.

## **How accurate is the information that the institution publishes about itself, such as prospectuses, programme descriptors and advertisements? Has York St John lived up to your expectations?**

### **Introduction**

This section reviews a number of examples where the University publish information about itself and assess the accuracy of the information. There is very little evidence to suggest that students are institutionally over whelming dissatisfied with, or disagree with the information the YSJ publishes about itself. That is not that to say that there are not pockets of dissatisfaction and the causes of this will be discussed in the section below.

### **Accuracy of information**

In this section the University's Transition to University survey was examined to try and assess pre arrival information. A total of 339 students (approximately 20%) completed the survey, which was sent out via a global email.

- In September 2009 85.5% of respondents said that they found the online 'Guide to Enrolment' either somewhat useful or extremely useful. In the open comments, the most common theme amongst students was that more information and support with student finance would make the enrolment process easier. Others also said that more IT support and instructions on how to use e:vision would be beneficial. In 2010 a very small number of open comments suggested that the site should be made less confusing, as one student stated:

*"The process was really confusing and by the end I did not know if I was fully enrolled or not, or what steps to take next."*

A small number also suggested the process would be easier if more detailed instructions about student finance were available.

- In 2009 69% said that they found the Welcome Week website useful. The most frequently suggested improvements for this site were making it easier to navigate and making timetables available in a clearer format. One student suggested:

*"perhaps have a variety of students describing how they found welcome week, and what they got involved in - to persuade new students to get involved in as much as possible to meet new people, feel settled in and have a great time."*

- For the start of 2010, the University adjusted the deadline dates for timetabling meaning that for the first time they had used a roll-over

scheme where 25% of the previous year's timetable was re-entered. The hope is that in upcoming years this percentage can be increased to create a timetable that can be easily predicted. This should allow students earlier access to make arrangements with part time jobs or childcare. This begins to address the number of students who commented that they wished they had received more information about their course and a copy of their timetable in advance. Although this change has been implemented, in the 2010 results timetable access was still reported as an issue. A common request was for timetables to be provided even earlier, especially for those who need to arrange childcare. Other respondents wanted reading lists to be provided earlier.

- Encouragingly, the University has looked to diversify its communication methods to students and it should be encouraged to look into expanding and developing these even further. Over half of the students responding to the survey said that they had used Facebook groups prior to coming to York St John. The overriding theme in the open comments section is summed up by this student's comments, highlighting that Facebook is seen as a valuable resource by students for meeting housemates, course mates, and seeking general reassurance before coming to university.

*"I found it very useful as I got to socialise with other students before arrivals, find out about accommodation and other issues, making me feel more confident before I came."*

The Union would like the university to develop safe and private spaces on its own website to nurture this type of interaction rather than the Facebook where any information is public and could be used against students.

## **Website**

The student homepage is useful and easily negotiable primarily full of services available.

This year saw the move from Blackboard to Moodle as York St John Virtual Learning Environment. It is therefore quite difficult to assess the expectations of this area as some students had Blackboard sites that were used to their full capacity while a majority used it as a dumping site for course notes. However, we can anecdotally report that there have been no formal reports of any issues with Moodle or of the transition. The Union is intending to produce a report on the use of Moodle by programmes to assess the consistency of use by tutors. This report will be presented to the appropriate academic committees after it has been completed.

Moodle and the University has also allowed the Students' Union to step up its own discussion pages in each programme. This is in its first year and so successes are difficult to report but encouragingly 9 out of the 16 current

forums were started by students, which shows that they are actively using the site and wanting to promote it and encourage others to use it. This will hopefully breed a culture of critical dialogue both between students and students and staff. A report on this usage is also being submitted to the appropriate academic committees to see if there is more support that academics can give to encourage greater student usage of these areas.

The Students' Union has also been involved in the pilot stage of the University's Sharepoint scheme. This IT project will create individualised homepages for every student where they can select the information that they want to receive from a variety of different internal sources. We are very excited about this project, particularly its ability to allow students to take control of their information needs and would hope that all aspects of the university would be encouraged to participate fully in the scheme.

## **Academic expectations Prospectuses**

It was reported to the Students' Union that Film and TV Production students did not feel that they were getting the course provision that they had been sold upon application. These concerns were raised with faculty management and now staff are working alongside students on the course to make sure that their experience matches what is written in advertising and information publications. This, alongside other comments (*"I was very disappointed that I specified during my interview that my aim was to become a counsellor and it was not made clear at an early stage that this programme would not allow for this."* **3<sup>rd</sup> Year Counselling student**) could demonstrate a tendency to over sell provision. York St John is in a unique position to offer a real close knit community environment alongside a dedicated and talented staff team but it must ensure that it uses these as its unique selling points and doesn't try to compete with some of the facilities and provision available at larger neighbouring institutions, especially as fees increase and with this student expectation. We feel that this collaboration between staff and students to write the prospectus information could be taken on by other facilities as an area of good practice.

This year, the Students' Union has also noticed an increasing trend of international students going through formal appeals processes with specific reference to failing to meet standards and increasing levels of plagiarism. Previously this has not been a large issue and we are now gathering quantitative data so that we can measure this trend year on year. With the University's ambitions to increase international student numbers 3 fold in the next few years, the Union would urge caution as to ensure support services are in place and that the suitability of candidates is being closely monitored. International students from the MA in Leadership and Management course had the following to report on academic provision and support:

*"I am quite clear about what subjects I am doing and they are very beneficial for the future prospects but because English is my second language I do find it difficult but tutor support is always there to make me understand the lectures. To help save time for lecturers I suggest to come up with more English writing (ex: essay writing) workshops especially for international students. As for most of the international students, like me this is a new learning experience."*

## **Other support available across the institution**

### **Introduction**

This section examines the other support available to students outside of their programme that impacts upon their academic experience. The University's Holgate Centre is widely known amongst students as the destination to seek advice on all issues relating to University. The excellent staff team based in this area use their wide knowledge base to ensure that students are signposted to appropriate help and support on a wide variety of Finance and Welfare issues. Links here with the Students Union are strong and another excellent example of the University and Union working in collaboration to improve the whole student experience. We are extremely proud of these relationships and are regularly looking for new ways that we can collaborate together from volunteering projects around financial support through video Frequently Asked Questions that are broadcast through the Union's website to University wide newsletters to draw academic staff attention to pastoral issues that they students may be facing.

### **Academic misconduct**

On occasions were students find themselves subject to academic misconduct they are often provided with detailed explanations of the allegations. These letters also direct students in the direction of the independent advice and support available from the University. This further helps develop the working relationship between the Students' Union and the University. While each faculty incorporates all the required information, the depth of explanation varies and it would be worth the University developing a standardised version of this letter so that the student experience when engaging with such issues is consistent across faculties.

It may be worth noting that along with the increase in tuition fees it is anticipated that as expectations increase relatively so will the number of complaints or appeals. Currently the Directorate for Learning Development is referred to as an independent source of advice and guidance. With the disestablishment of this department an effective update of who takes up this responsibility will need to be communicated to the student body in order to manage a potentially increasing workload.

It is presumed that students who have been through these protocols are generally satisfied with the outcomes of them. This can be said to be reflected in very low number of students progressing to a level two appeal or complaint and no students making cases to the OIA. However, this information is based only on the students that have sought advice and guidance and without a formal system for measuring the outcome satisfaction for all students who have been through the protocols we cannot definitively say that this is the case.

As referred to elsewhere in this document, with the University's plans to increase international intake we would suggest that work is carried out to simplify the often complicated language that is used to explain academic protocols and procedures. This would be of benefit not just to international students but to all students in terms of them fully understanding the system they are being subjected to.

## **Careers**

At York St John it is compulsory that all programmes support a credited work placement module. While in principle this is an excellent policy some concerns have arisen around the support offered to make these placements as effective and relevant as possible for students to explore potential career paths. During the strategic review work of the Students' Union we identified that Career Development and prospects on graduation are the second biggest concern for our students (second only to Academic Achievement), and the University has also acknowledged the importance of this area in the work it is doing to set a new strategic direction for the institution. By identifying this as a key work stream and honestly appraising this as an area in need of development we believe the University has the right approach and would want the Students' Union to be a key partner in the delivery of career development projects across the institution.

Over the past year the University has begun to develop its careers advice provision culminating in the launch of the YSJ connect website this January. It is too early to assess the impact of this initiative but we are happy to be partners in this project and provide volunteering opportunities for students to help to reach their career aspirations. Again, with the disestablishment of the Directorate for Learning Development it is important that this initiative finds a suitable home and is supported if it is to develop into a widespread success.

## **Supporting Disability at York St John**

As the University has noted in its own Annual Evaluative Report for the Directorate for Learning Development, the number of students declaring disability on application, during enrolment and throughout their course of study is still increasing. We are pleased that a review of this area was undertaken in 2010 and look forward to seeing the areas that were highlighted for action being implemented. In discussions with the Director for Learning Development we have previously raised our concerns about the level of available resource for supporting disabled students and we hope that the new Disability Manager will be able to make sure that the institution is meeting national standards and providing consistent support.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

As a result of this document and the highlighted areas of concern, below are listed a number of recommendations that, through working in collaboration, we at the Students' Union feel would greatly benefit the experience of our students here at York St John. These are the distillation of comments made throughout the document:

### **1. Getting a job on graduation (as also identified by the Universities Strategic direction plans).**

Careers is an area of prime concern for our students and in partnership with the Union the University needs to invest time and resource in to improving provision and support for students.

### **2. Academic support**

Identification and communication of where independent university support re: appeals and complaints will be provided under the new management structure must be completed as the Union does not currently have the resource capacity to deal with this entirely.

### **3. Greater disability support**

Although steps have been made to improve this situation it requires further monitoring.

### **4. Learning and Library resources**

A comprehensive review of the opening times and working areas with the Fountains Learning Centre needs to be carried out and continuous improvements to this area need to be made through the feedback from the Learning Centre User Forum

### **5. Facilities**

The University needs to ensure it is advertising within its means in order to manage the expectations students may have in relation to provision available at other neighbouring institutions.

### **6. Timetabling**

The University needs to continue steps already undertaken to improve the stability of timetable as well as working to make it accessible further and further advance of the start of term. The work carried out by the Timetable Review Group is a solid start.

### **7. Culture of Criticism**

We would recommend that the University continues to develop a healthy relationship with criticism without defensively dismissing student comments as unrepresentative, and begin to really value the voice and experience of every single student and not just that of the generic population.