

University of Salford - askUS

In April 2015 the University of Salford successfully implemented askUS, a new student-facing 'one stop shop,' taking just fourteen weeks from project launch to service inception. Bringing together teams from three disparate locations with very different ways of working, the askUS project co-located a range of services including finance, visas and immigration, registration, counselling and wellbeing, careers and employability...and many more!

The success of the askUS project was centred on co-creating with students, and working with operational colleagues to design how the service should work, look and feel. The project team worked tirelessly to get things done in little over three months, including adapting existing building layouts and student systems, and completely changing some team's ways of working to ensure the student was at the heart of the new service.

Background

Prior to askUS, front facing student services were delivered from three separate locations across the university (Humphrey Booth House, Faraday House and University House); this resulted in high student bounce with a potential distance covered of almost two miles between services.

There were a number of disadvantages with Salford's arrangements for student services prior to 2015:

- The multi-location set up was becoming a major barrier to student success, with the distance between services really slowed down process flows and decision making.
- The set up also impacted on the university's ability to deliver a positive student experience, at times resulting in difficulties in even getting the basics right.
- Process inefficiencies were also apparent due to the duplication of work across the three service desks causing frustrations for our students.
- There were no clear customer service guidelines to ensure the approaches at each service desk were aligned to the university's core values.
- Students didn't feel engaged with the services delivered in each location and did not feel a sense of belonging or identity.
- The services being located in three separate buildings also led to a lack of common understanding between the service providers with minimal partnership working.
- The relationships between the university and the Students' Union needed to be improved with both services feeling distinctly separate to students leading to a poor student experience.
- Historically there had been a lack of student consultation or gathering of feedback on core services which resulted in the student voice being diluted.

Approach

It had been almost five years since any of the university's front facing service areas had been updated. The university's principle around putting our students first made it feel like the right time to review the quality of service and facilities.

The project was launched in the middle of January 2015 and ran for a period of fourteen weeks in total, opening on schedule, with the askUS service on Monday 13 April 2015. The project team achieved this through the actions below.

- **Stakeholder Engagement:** The project team was created with representatives from key stakeholder groups, including marketing and student recruitment (design team), estates, IT services, finance, student administration, student life and the Students' Union. Workstreams were allocated and each team member was clear from the outset on their role, responsibility and milestones. The benefits of this approach included effective cross-team working and an aligned vision of the project outcome.
- **Co-creation:** The project team co-created with students and colleagues on the service design, look and feel and operating model. As part of the development of the service design, students were invited to choose a name for the service from a shortlist drawn together by staff and students; this resulted in the chosen name "askUS" as it succinctly described the service and aligned to the university's US brand. Furthermore, students were influential in the retro design concept and brand colours. This all resulted in students and colleagues feeling engaged and valued during the period of change.
- **Colleague Engagement:** The askUS project team held workshops, focus groups and briefing sessions with colleagues who would be required to work in the newly launched student hub, askUS. These colleagues helped to design the operating model and training plans needed to deliver the new service successfully. An ambassador was identified in each team to ensure representation across all areas. All colleagues were invited to raise questions or concerns with their ambassador who relayed this to the askUS project team for advice and resolution. Whilst some resistance remained with this approach, the open forum enabled a quick and fluid response to colleague concerns. Furthermore, this approach created a positive sense of belonging for all colleagues in this new and exciting venture.
- **Team Development:** The successful launch of askUS required the bringing together of three disparate teams into one area with an overall reduction in available staff office space. Innovative ways of utilising the back office area were explored as a means to accommodate all teams and to create a "one-team" ethos. This was challenging and involved a negotiation of desk space across three departments and a step change to hot-desking for some teams. By co-locating and integrating teams throughout the back-office area, an open, flexible and cohesive way of working has been achieved. This has helped to develop working relationships across the teams and has significantly improved team ways of working and delivery of service excellence.

- **Service Launch:** The askUS service was launched on schedule and was fully operational from 9am on the opening day. This could not have been achieved without the engagement of staff and stakeholders, demonstrated by volunteers working during the weekend prior to the launch to ensure the service was ready. Following the launch, team leaders met with their teams on a daily basis to gather feedback which was used to make agile service improvements and to ensure colleagues were supported throughout this period. The teams and stakeholders were invited to two celebration / thank you events; an opportunity to celebrate the hard work and success of the project.

Success factors

The launch of askUS has been a major driver in the university delivering on its principle around putting our students first. Key success stories include:

- **Improved Student Experience:** As reflected in the recent survey carried out by Whatuni.com, the University has jumped 54 places overall to 47th, with major improvements in the area of Student Support (12th); undoubtedly askUS will have had a significant impact on this improved rating. Student feedback has been overwhelmingly positive with students indicating they are extremely satisfied with the askUS service.
- **Queries Resolved:** More than 80% of queries are resolved at the askUS front line, delivering a first time fix for students. Any queries not resolved at this point are directed to the askUS referral lounge for a specialist advisor to support the student on the same day on issues relating to visas and immigration, tuition fees and awards, or registration and student records. A small number of students are referred to a bespoke one-to-one appointment for support surrounding health and wellbeing, or disability and learning support.
- **Staff Experience:** Colleagues have reported that they are happier working in the new location delivering the askUS Service; contributing factors to this include being located in the student centric area of the campus, close to the Students' Union and student accommodation. Improved cross-team working and reduction of duplicated task has increased motivation and colleague engagement.
- **Working Relationships:** The relationship between the USSU and the University has improved dramatically following the collaboration during the project – a major success story for students and colleagues.
- **Sustainability:** The original intention was that University House, as a location for a student one-stop shop, was only an interim solution. There were limited options for the location of askUS within the target date of the project deadline and the decision to locate the service at University House was reached following a feasibility assessment of other possible locations. Improvement works were required to make it student-centric and the askUS team were able to deliver these improvements on minimal budget. Yet the success of the space configuration and the close proximity to the new student accommodation has opened the door for the university to consider askUS in University House on a more permanent basis.
- **Visits to askUS:** Since the service launched, site visits and service tours have been delivered to a number of internal and external stakeholders, including the chair of council, vice chancellor, chief operating officer, registrar and other HEIs interested in achieving what the university has achieved with askUS. Additionally, askUS colleagues have presented about the

success of askUS at conferences which has generated further interest in the sector. Perhaps, most significantly, the inclusion of askUS tours in the university's open day programme of events, showcasing askUS to prospective students and their families, has been a major success. Feedback from prospective students and their families indicate that askUS sets the university apart from our competitors.

Contact details

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