

Showcasing excellence

LIVERPOOL HOPE UNIVERSITY

Just five years ago Liverpool Hope University had an old-style canteen with dated menus and basic food. With increasing competition for both students and hospitality trade and rising customer expectations, it had to up its game. A programme of investment in the hospitality and catering department has transformed its offer and it now has smart new facilities, high quality cuisine and a focus on staff development to ensure high standards of service.



TUCO

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To say Liverpool Hope University's hospitality and catering department has gone through a period of change over the last five years would be something of an understatement.

More than £1m of investment in facilities between 2009 and 2013 and a complete change of ethos has not only transformed the quality of offer to students, staff and outside customers, it has delivered in spades on the balance sheet.

Since 2010 income has grown by more than 120%, from £733,159 in 2009-10 to more than £1.6m in the last financial year. It has reversed mounting losses and is now breaking even.

In an era when students' expectations are rising year on year, Liverpool Hope is more than matching those demands. The high standard of its food and service now befits the university's grand surroundings and is enabling it to maximise the opportunities offered by the Liverpool's fast-growing reputation as a premier venue for conferences and other events.

It's a far cry from what was on offer back in 2009, admits Gary Pace, head of catering and conferences. 'Originally we had one old style school canteen that was making a huge loss year on year. The decision was therefore made to restructure the whole catering service.'

The changes since then have complemented one of the biggest periods of investment in the university's 170-year history with major developments at the university's two campuses: Hope Park, an educational village in the suburbs, and the Creative Campus near the city centre.

For the catering department, the first major change saw the old canteen at Hope Park close for a £450,000 refit in 2010 to transform it into a modern food court with separate areas for everything from a carvery to world food. It also introduced a general store selling groceries and a new coffee shop all within the same area.

Soon after, Eden Café was opened to provide a modern, stylish place to eat and drink after lectures. It seats 120 people and has proved a big hit with students and staff alike. That initial phase of investment had an immediate effect on the business, says Gary, with income rising by almost 50% within the first year.

Buoyed by the impact, a second phase of investment got underway in 2012. Our Place Bar and Restaurant opened at the Hope Park campus to provide a 1,000-capacity, multifunctional space that serves as a venue, bar and high quality eatery. In terms of the latter, its centrepiece is a traditional open pizza oven. Many restaurants lay claim to having authentic pizzas based on recipes that have been passed down over generations. In Liverpool Hope's case, it's the real deal.

Gary explains: 'Just as we were preparing to open Our Place and were recruiting for staff, we had an Italian New Yorker come in to apply. He had worked in his family restaurant in New York and in Italy and brought his own recipes. It was a stroke of luck really, he turned up when the adverts were going live. We'd already accepted an application from someone else so we decided to take him on too.'



KEY FACTS

- 7,865 students
- More than £1m invested in catering areas between 2009-13
- 100 catering staff (42 permanent, 48 student and 10 casual)
- Income set to be £1.8m by the end of current financial year – compared with £733k in 2009-10
- More than 170,000 transactions a month
- Saved £66k last year using TUCO purchasing frameworks

INCOME GROWTH

2009/10 **£733,159**
(prior to refurbishments)

2010/11 **£1,076,952**
(first year after first phase of investment)

2011/12 **£1,062,196**

2012/13 **£1,681,928**
(first year after second phase of investment)

2013/14 **£1,627,177**

2014/15 **£1,627,064**

'As an in-house catering department we can make our decisions quickly and change things to meet demand. If something isn't popular or there's a new trend, we can respond to it'

– Gary Pace, head of catering and conferences

INVESTING IN STAFF

While investing in facilities has been vital, getting the right staff in place and putting resources into their continued development has been another crucial part of Liverpool Hope's success. Gary says the quality of food on offer back in 2009 simply wasn't up to scratch – at a time of rising competition for both students and hospitality customers. That's why any programme of investment in facilities had to be matched by a shake up in the staff team.

To drive forward that change Gary took the decision to recruit a head chef from a restaurant rather than contract catering background in order to bring in a different set of skills and experience. Since joining the team in 2012, Ian Stott has raised the bar several notches in terms of both the quality of food and standards of service, says Gary.

'Our income has risen at an incredible rate and one of the biggest reasons is that the quality of food is 100 times better. We did have to offer a much more competitive salary – but then the head chef now has a managerial role.

'He's had a huge impact on the menu and expectations around quality. It's none of your meat and two veg or lasagne and garlic bread – it's a bit more interesting than that!'

Instilling the importance of high quality customer service is also easier when you have someone who's worked in some of the country's top restaurants at the helm (see profile, overleaf). The department has 48 students among its staff along with 42 permanent and 10 casual contract employees and many of them work on banqueting and other formal dining functions.

'They get mandatory training but we also bring them all in every six weeks for customer service training to remind them of its importance,' says Gary. 'But we keep it fun for 18-21 year olds that want to come along and work here.'

Although Gary has a dedicated conference team under him, he says there's strong sense of togetherness across all the catering staff and an eagerness to share knowledge and experience. For example, one employee has just attended a baristas training course in Bologna, Italy, organised by TUCO. Rachel Jameson, who is based at the Creative Campus, will pass on what's she's learned to staff at Hope Park.

'She sums up the kind of people we now have among the staff. Rachel understands the budget and what we're trying to achieve here. These are not just people coming in just to do the job and go home – there's a real sense of ownership.'



SPEND THROUGH TUCO FRAMEWORKS

TOTAL EXPENDITURE
£577,584.93

Cash Savings
£60,924.55

Process Savings
£6,000

TUCO Annual Subscription
£220.00

TOTAL NET SAVINGS
£66,704.55

HOSPITALITY OFFER

4 X FUNCTION AND EVENT BARS / ROOMS

Our Place Student Bar, Eden lounge venue, The Great Hall, Capstone theatre bars offer high quality purpose designed and built bars, servicing various capacities

INTERNAL HOSPITALITY SERVICE

Provides all internal hospitality to departments across both campuses

UNIVERSITY CORPORATE EVENT CATERING

Provides high quality restaurant standard food to all university events

CONFERENCE & EVENT CATERING

Provides all food and drink requirements to all external conference and events

CORE CATERING OFFER

MAIN FOOD COURT

Serving the vast majority of staff and student for the breakfast to lunchtime trade, served from five food service counters each offering something different

4 X COFFEE SHOPS

Eden Café, Chapters Café, FML Coffee Shop, The Gallery coffee shop – offering high quality coffees along with lighter food options in pleasant surroundings

2 X GENERAL STORES

FML Shop, Creative Shop – offering the full range of convenience items you would expect to see in this form of outlet

CORNERSTONE CAFÉ

A refectory based in the Creative Campus offering a full range of hot and cold meals and drinks

Our Place Bar & Kitchen – serving high quality handmade pizza and gourmet burgers



MAKING THE MOST OF TUCO MEMBERSHIP

Another major change that's contributed to the catering department's success is far greater use of TUCO's frameworks.

TUCO procures goods and services for 340 universities and colleges, 28 local authorities and four NHS trusts, meaning it can use its purchasing muscle to secure lower prices and demand high quality. In 2014-15, Liverpool Hope saved more than £66,000 by using TUCO's wide range of catering frameworks and Gary expects that figure to rise.

'We didn't always use their frameworks in the past and were buying outside the framework on a number of things. That has been tightened up over the last two years. Every supplier now has to be in the TUCO framework. We have standardised that now.'

'TUCO ensures we get a discount on the price. But it's the bigger picture. If you are not doing it completely, really should you be taking all the benefits of membership from the small bits you are doing? Using frameworks saves our guys time and it's all there ready to use.'

Gary has just joined TUCO's benchmarking group and plans to get more involved in the consortium's calendar of activities, spurred on in part by his experience on this year's study tour to China.

'It was amazing, a brilliant opportunity. But one of the things that I found really beneficial was the time spent with other delegates. I got to talk more than you would at a conference or formal meeting and pick up tips along the way. That was an added bonus.'



IN-HOUSE BENEFITS

Gary is unsurprisingly a fervent advocate of keeping university catering services in-house. Like many universities, Liverpool Hope's catering and hospitality department had to weather the storm when the economic downturn hit in 2008 as the conference trade took a hit. Since then the introduction of student fees has ushered in a new era in higher education characterised by increasing demands from paying customers.

Being in-house has enabled Liverpool Hope to be bold in its decision to invest and nimble in the way it strives to continuously improve its offer.

'With contract catering they have set menus produced higher up that get fed down. As an in-house catering department we can make our decisions quickly and change things to meet demand. If something isn't popular or there's a new trend, we can respond to it. It also allows us to differentiate what's on offer across our different outlets.

'Students are paying a lot of money to come to university. Their expectations are a lot higher. Also, we're not subsidised by the university and we have to at the very least break even. Students are paying the same prices they would anywhere else. If they are going to use us rather than the high street you have to offer them a good quality service.'

It also gives his team the freedom to innovate – whether it's the recent investment in Our Place to give students access to gaming consoles or a new customer feedback system inspired by the University of Hong Kong which uses social media.

Having a regenerated city centre as impressive as Liverpool's on your doorstep with all the competition that brings also keeps Gary and his team on their toes. But it has its benefits.

'Because Liverpool is constantly evolving year on year it gives us great inspiration,' he says. 'You can see what's hot at the moment and where the kids are going. I get to go out and test it – it's a good side of the job!'



'People expect better quality and a better service now. They aren't going to pay for a frozen burger or pizza when there are gourmet burger restaurants on the high street they could go to'

– Ian Stott, head chef

BRINGING FIVE STAR RESTAURANT QUALITY TO UNIVERSITY CATERING

Ian Stott recently invited a friend and former colleague over to check out the catering at Liverpool Hope University.

He left pleasantly surprised and said it was on a par with the food where he works. It's probably worth pointing out at this juncture that he runs an award-winning restaurant at a five star hotel in central London.

Perceptions of university catering can often be far removed from reality and that's especially the case at Liverpool Hope. Ian, who has been head chef since 2012, believes that while his university is ahead of the game in terms of standards, it's a sign of things to come.

'I think it's the way things will go. People expect better quality and a better service now. They aren't going to pay for a frozen burger or pizza when there are gourmet burger restaurants on the high street they could go to. The standard of food people expect is getting higher and higher.'

Ian's career prior to entering higher education catering took in boutique hotels in York and spells in London at The Ritz and The Connaught, where he worked under Gordon Ramsay.

But the vacancy at Liverpool Hope offered a completely different challenge and a variety of work that's difficult to match.

'When the job came up here, I spoke to people here to find out what their aim was. They wanted to raise the bar, so it was perfect for me to come in. I felt it would be good chance to pass on my experience to others and really help to raise the university's profile.'

The last three years have seen a complete overhaul, from the way dishes are prepared to standards of service – whether it's serving up toasties or preparing a banquet. The emphasis is

firmly on preparing food from scratch, readymade meals are a no-no.

'There are some universities where it's all about bought in pizzas, pies etc in every area. They're not chefs. It's just people opening boxes and there's no creativity, no thought has gone into it. I want everything to be made fresh.

'It's something we've worked very hard on over the last couple of years. It's improved the sales and we are getting good feedback.'

Cheap ingredients are often a false economy, he says. He cites the sausages used for breakfast in the food court and cafes. They cost 25p and he could get them for 12p, but will that get the punters in?

'People will get a better quality eating experience and come back. They could cook the equivalent of the cheaper sausage in their student accommodation. If they know there's something of high quality here they'll make the effort to come in.'

Customer service has improved enormously, although Ian wants to drive standards higher: 'We need to make sure the quality is consistent across the board.'

He adds: 'When you have people coming in for functions, conferences and dinners, whoever comes through that door – you don't know who they are. It could be a boss of a big company who sees the rooms, the buildings and the quality of the food and thinks "could I bring my clients here".'

'That's one of the reasons why we need the same standards all the time. Or it could be students with their parents who are looking around the universities. They'll experience beautiful buildings and great food. It all helps. Parents think, "I'll know my child won't be eating junk food".'

TUCO is the leading professional membership body for in-house caterers operating in the higher and further education sector and is used by universities and colleges throughout the UK. We also support in-house catering teams in the wider public sector, including local authorities and NHS trusts.

We are very much the voice of our members—championing excellence, facilitating the sharing of best practice and giving in-house caterers the profile they deserve. TUCO offers a comprehensive programme of subsidised training and events designed to inspire and provide practical insight. It includes the TUCO annual conference, now firmly established as a key date on the university catering world's calendar, and international study tours.

Through the TUCO Academy, run in partnership with in partnership with London South Bank University, we offer training designed specifically to address the professional development needs of caterers in higher and further education.

On top of that, every year we stage a competition designed to showcase and celebrate the depth of talent we have across the industry.

TUCO responds to the changing needs of its members by acting as a forum for networking and learning and ensuring they are kept up to date with the latest trends and analysis via our own research. Membership is open to all in-house catering operations in the higher and further education sector.

If you are not a further or higher education institution, then it is still possible for you to join TUCO. Just contact us to find out more.

OUR MEMBERS RECEIVE SUPPORT AND GUIDANCE FROM TUCO IN FOUR KEY AREAS:



SHARE

TUCO provides a platform where members can combine ideas and achievements to collectively raise the profile of university and college catering in the UK. We also help members to network with other professionals and industry experts, sharing best practice and culinary trends.



LEARN

We offer a wide range of subsidised courses, training, study tours and professional advice, to maximise each member's potential.



GROW

We help our members to keep up-to-date with the latest market research, industry trends and consumer preferences and gain insight into studies on topics affecting the foodservice market.



BUY

TUCO has significant buying power, purchasing £150m of goods and services every year for universities and colleges as well as local authorities and NHS trusts. Members can choose from a variety of EU compliant catering frameworks and a wide range of suppliers.

"In four years, I have seen TUCO grow from a purchasing consortium into a true vehicle for the benefit of university caterers."

—Jeremy Mabbutt, Head of Hospitality Services at Aberystwyth University

For more details of how to join TUCO call **0161 713 3420** or email **info@tuco.org**



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