

Monday, 11th November 2024

FAO: Professor Charlie Jeffery and Professor Ken Badcock

Dear Vice Chancellor and Deputy Vice Chancellor,

We, the University of York's College Chairs and Presidents for 2024, are writing to express our concerns about the current management of York's collegiate system. We have been trying to navigate and mitigate these behind the scenes for some time, both alongside and through York Students' Union, and through other forums. However, the nature of the recent cuts to many College services (owing to the University's financial difficulties), combined with ever-decreasing support and comms from key University decision makers over the last few months, have forced us to take this action.

This letter will first provide the background to the key issues we are facing and our primary concerns, before outlining the actions and assurances we are asking from the University in response.

Background: Our Concerns

The University of York is proud of its collegiate system, and rightly so. It is one of the biggest factors in why students apply to study at York in the first place, and receives overwhelmingly positive feedback from both current students and graduates (as evidenced by annual National Student Survey results). Colleges are a vital cog in York's student life, providing a "community within a community", and an immense variety of student initiatives, ranging from leadership positions to sport and music opportunities. They also offer direct, targeted student support, including wellbeing and accommodation services, and weekly food events to support the current cost-of-living crisis. Their value is not just felt by Home students, but also International students, who face other barriers, such as language and cultural differences; Colleges are central in helping these students to settle in and find a community. All this just skims the surface of what the Colleges do, and their value to the University and its mission.

As Chairs and Presidents, we too are demonstrably proud of York's collegiate system, and have appreciated and embraced the opportunity this year to "give something back" to our community. We, with the support of our College Committees, have put in significant voluntary hours and efforts this year to make our Colleges the best versions of themselves. The range is massive, covering small craft activities, nights out, and music and sports initiatives. Most prominently, however, was Welcome (Freshers) Week; a massive labour of love, planned and run almost entirely by students, who worked incredible hours during the week (paired with significant time given in our Summer holidays to arrange the events in the first place). Such student-led initiatives testament to the esteem in which we hold our Colleges. They, and many other University initiatives, simply could not run without us.

However, in the midst of the recent cost-cutting measures (which we recognise have adversely affected everyone concerned), we feel that York's Colleges have been hit particularly hard, and their strategic importance to the University is being devalued. Consequently, the impact of these cuts has made our workload greater and harder.

Most noticeable in the recent changes has been the loss of three College Managers – Alcuin, James and Langwith Colleges’ – to Voluntary Severance, with no immediate plans to replace them. Instead, their roles have been subsumed to the Derwent, Vanbrugh and Goodricke’s College Managers respectively. This, alongside the closure of independent College receptions (the result of the University’s decision to move to an “agile” model), has caused significant workload increases and wellbeing concerns, for both remaining staff members and students alike. Quite aside from the direct effects of these cuts, we are worried about what these losses imply about the University’s valuation of Colleges and their management. We are especially concerned that these changes could form the first step towards full mergers of Colleges. As College Committees, and on behalf of our fantastic, hardworking, dedicated College staffing teams, this is something we formally oppose in the strongest possible terms. However, whilst we are keen and determined to preserve each College’s own unique and distinctive identity, we fear the current model will make sustaining this increasingly difficult unless something is done.

In addition to these cuts, we have become increasingly concerned with, and frustrated by, the lack of engagement from the University when making decisions or discussing changes that directly affect our work, and which we are then expected to comply with. To compound this, communications we receive informing us of these outcomes are frequently late and unhelpful, causing us unnecessary stress and feelings of alienation as we try and work around significant changes with little notice or support from the University. There have been countless incidents this year which have had significant impact, ranging from College funding, College staffing changes, moving of Freshers move-in days, and late notice given of Colleges’ student allocations. Goodricke College, for example, have found over 50% of their College given over to returning students this year. Despite the massive implications on their Freshers Week planning and, subsequently, their College community and finances, they feel they have been offered inadequate support from the University in helping to offset the knock-on effects of this decision. Alcuin College raised similar concerns last year, when 50% was allocated to Postgraduate students; meanwhile, other Colleges, like David Kato, have been overwhelmed with their allocations of Freshers, leading to oversubscribed events and insufficient provision for other amenities (including sports and music facilities). This imbalance is unfair for us and the students in our College communities, and suggests that student committee voices are not being consulted by or listened to by senior leadership.

In short, we feel that York’s collegiate system, and the people (both staff and students) who work so hard within it are becoming increasingly devalued. The University simply would not function in its present form without Colleges, nor without the substantial time and dedication given by College Student Committees – all of whom, let us reiterate, are **volunteers**; students who give of their time freely and willingly to contribute towards and improve their communities. As the student leaders for our Colleges, we demand better for our community, and strongly believe that the University can and must do better to support us in our work.

What We Are Seeking From The University

In response to our concerns above, we are seeking the following responses from the University:

A Statement From The University

We are seeking a statement demonstrating that the University still considers its Colleges to be a priority. As well as providing assurances on their strategic place in the University community, the statement should also lay out **how** the University will continue to support the existing College infrastructure, staffing and student volunteers (both over the next few months, following the recent unprecedented changes, and in the longer term). We would particularly value the University's recognition of both the Colleges' strategic importance, and the student volunteers that make the events, activities and initiatives within Colleges possible in the first place.

A Commitment to Better Communication

The root cause of many of our frustrations has been the consistently poor, late, and insensitive communications from the University's decision makers to us as members of our College Committees. In the past, College Chairs and Presidents met regularly with the Vice Chancellor; however, these meetings have not happened this year, resulting in increasingly disjointed communication between us and the University's decision makers. This has had nothing but negative consequences, increasing our workloads and causing frustration and a sense of being undervalued. We are therefore seeking strong commitment from the University towards better communication between key decision-makers and College Committees, including the reinstatement of a regular meeting (at least once per semester) between College Chairs and Presidents and members of the University's leadership team.

Consultation With Colleges on Future Changes

Finally, we are seeking better and fairer representation in decision making processes. Any proposed changes that will have a significant impact on a College will be subject to consultation between the University and that College's student committee prior to any decision being reached and implemented. In the event that a proposed change is unavoidable, we expect much greater support from the University, including communication as soon as the outcome is known (as outlined above).

In Conclusion

We hope that the University will actively listen to our concerns and work with us to address these in a timely and efficient manner. York's collegiate system is one of the University of York's biggest strengths, and something we wish to see retain its strategic importance. We value our role as student leaders, and are privileged to have had the opportunity to serve our College communities this year; however, our roles have been more difficult than anticipated, and much of the challenge has been unnecessary and unwarranted. This is not sustainable in attracting or retaining the next generation of student volunteers, without whom the University would not be able to function in any manner close to how it currently operates.

We thank you for taking the time to read this letter. We look forward to receiving a full response addressing our concerns in due course, and ideally before a recently-scheduled meeting with Professor Charlie Jeffery on 2nd December.

Yours sincerely,

Simon Edwards – President, Alcuin College
Ella Manger-Webber – President, Anne Lister College
Emily Eurus-Jones – President, Constantine College
The Executive Committee – David Kato College
Eva Caston Bell – Chair, Derwent College
Atharva Inamdar – President, Goodricke College
Alexandra Thiel-Czerwinke – President, Halifax College
Catriona Forbes – Co-Chair, James College
Lily Quick – Co-Chair, James College
Sophie Bayliss – President, Langwith College
Sophie Lettington – President, Vanbrugh College
Lewis Parrey – Union Affairs Officer, York SU