

Two new colleges announced as five hundred freshers miss out on campus accommodation

YUSU president Millie Beach claims University “needs to do more” to meet housing needs as first years outsourced to private lets in the city



By Amy Gibbons, Deputy Editor (2015/16)
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Credit: Eamonn Byrne

Nouse can exclusively reveal that plans to build two new colleges are underway, as the University struggles to cope with an unsustainable demand for campus accommodation.

The new buildings, which will be situated either one each on Heslington East and Heslington West, or both on Heslington East, are due to be finished and ready for use in 2019 and 2020 respectively, although the completion dates are not guaranteed.

The news comes as this year 500 students were outsourced to private accommodation, after colleges were oversubscribed.

Hundreds were assigned accommodation in sites such as The Boulevard on Hull Road as they missed out on campus spots.

The University doesn't guarantee campus accommodation for all, but the system, according to University Registrar and Secretary David Duncan, “is designed to be as fair as it can be”.

Increased University housing has been in demand for a number of years, as more returning and

postgraduate students have opted for college accommodation. As a result, last year the University undertook initial design work on the two further colleges to provide for new and returning students. The project involved consultation with both student representatives and college staff.

The University anticipates up to 650 rooms in each college, which will also feature common room space as well as separate study and lounge areas to “encourage students to mix”.

On behalf of the planning group, Duncan clarified: “Our long-term policy is to have a balance of college accommodation and academic buildings as well as other facilities on both East and West.”

The University is now in the process of sourcing funding for the development. Accommodation Services apparently attempted to tackle oversubscription in September, as some returning students were approached in a bid to free up space.

One second year History student, who had been trying to reassign their room all summer to no avail, told Nouse: “There was an enjoyable irony about an email that arrived in early September from the Accommodation Services, which offered to take my room away from me for no cost as they had too much demand for the number of rooms!

“I filled in a short form and literally two hours later I was given confirmation that my room had been signed over to someone else.”

The email stated the University had received “a higher than expected number of accommodation applications from first year undergraduate students”, and were “offering to find replacement first year tenants for the upper year students advertising their rooms on our accommodation adverts page”.

A third year English and Philosophy student was also granted a free room upgrade by Accommodation Services “in order to create empty flats and houses for first years”. Also notified by email, they were informed: “We have received a higher than expected demand from first year undergraduates this year and are [therefore] moving some continuing undergraduates.”

Langwith and Vanbrugh were among the colleges who sent the emails to returning students. According to an FOI response, roughly 10 per cent of applicants missed out on campus accommodation altogether. In addition, many students were left disappointed with their allocated housing on campus, with even safe offer holders finding themselves bottom of the list.

One first year student studying Biomedical Sciences told Nouse they were allocated only their fifth preference, despite receiving an unconditional offer from York.

“I applied the day after accommodation applications opened and I held an unconditional offer, so to be honest I fully expected to get one of my top choices for accommodation, as the website says priority will be given to those who apply early and also if York is their first choice,” they said.

“Since I met both of these requirements and on top of this my offer was unconditional, I was very upset when I discovered I had got my 5th choice.”

They added that Accommodation Services were “very unhelpful” and the stressful process made them “anxious to come to York”.

“All I received was a very generic email saying there was nothing I could do and suggesting I advertise for a room swap,” they explained.

“Not only did I have accommodation I really didn’t want, but the University had been very unhelpful when I asked for help with this issue.”

Another first year student studying English and Related Literature, and who is now living in Alcuin, said a shortage of rooms with suitable lets had cost them financially. “I quickly ran out of choices of low cost accommodation so had to put 51 week [let] options lower down on the list.

“Despite applying the day the accommodation opened, I got my 7th choice of housing,” they said.

“It’s ridiculous to offer so many 51-week rooms as almost all students have no need for it.”

On the issue of failures in the allocation system, Duncan commented: “The current system allows students to choose their preferred college accommodation based on location, price, length of contract, facilities and so on. Inevitably, some options are more popular than others, so it isn’t possible to meet everyone’s preferences.

“Even so, the system is designed to be as fair as it can be. We will review how it operates in conjunction with YUSU and GSA in the course of this year.”

“We request a minimum of nine preferences (more are welcome) so we can work to offer a preference available from our supply.”

Millie Beach, YUSU President, commented that the University “needs to do more” to provide for students, “particularly in the era of £9k per year fees”.

“The University must not risk damaging the experience for students [...] by taking on more students than we can cater for in regards to accommodation or any other University facility,” she explained. “Great care must be taken in balancing estates development strategy with recruitment expectations.”

The allocation of accommodation at York has been a controversial topic for a number of years, as the system has been changed and updated on a regular basis.

In 2015 Nouse reported that over 200 students were refused their top 10 accommodation preferences, and the previous year an email-based system which has since been scrapped was branded “stupid”, “flawed” and a “complete joke” by freshers.



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