

UoS Strategy Consultation

Student & Market Insight

February 2021

CONSULTATION METHOD



The University of Southampton launched a consultation seeking opinions on the University Strategy in 2020.

The consultation concerned the following groups:

- Staff (n=723)
- External stakeholders (n=27)
- Students (n=1024)

The staff survey consisted of 9 open-ended questions and 1 single choice question, categorising staff members by career pathway.

External stakeholders (contacted through a survey) and students (invited to take part through booths in communal spaces) were asked a more limited range of questions centred around current and future university priorities and core pillars.

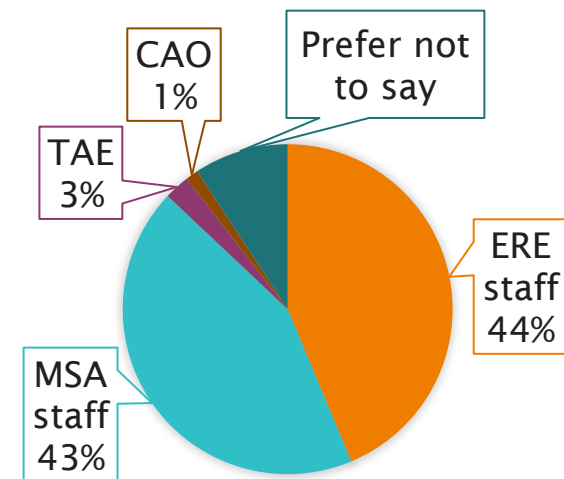


Data was collected by the University and then coded/analysed by **Shift**, an external market research agency.

This report focuses on staff responses, occasionally feeding in insight from students and external stakeholders where relevant.

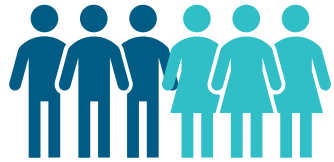
There were very few significant differences across the main two categories of staff members (Academic/Professional Services).

STAFF RESPONSES BY CAREER PATHWAY



Executive Summary

STRATEGY & CONSULTATION



What did the UoS community think?

1) Involvement

Overall, it is important that the strategy did not appear to ‘come from the top’, fully formed and imposed on the rest.

The strategy should be developed from the bottom up, with **staff across faculties taking an active role** in shaping how the strategies would be interpreted and implemented in their areas.

2) Language

The current language used to articulate the strategy does not necessarily resonate with the community.

Many wanted more **emphasis on the people** and on societal impact, while others wanted more clarity as to **how the vision and aspiration translated into everyday actions** across different job descriptions.

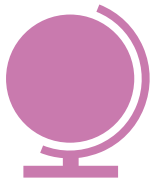
3) Communication

More could also be done to **communicate the strategy** across the university, motivating staff members to feel part of ‘One Southampton’.

4) Change fatigue

It should be noted that some staff members reported change fatigue (e.g. restructuring, change in leadership) and seemed to have limited trust in a new strategy being implemented or resulting in meaningful progress.

THE VISION AND MISSION IN REALITY



The mission **'to change the world for the better'** was seen as the most inspiring part of the strategy and responses across the questions show that staff care about the societal impact of the university through its **education, research, public engagement and operations**.

Concerns related to two main areas:

- Doubts around implementation – and what was needed to realise the vision.
- How the vision was articulated and communicated – with many thinking that it could be more inspiring.

There are doubts as to what extent the vision could actually be implemented and the tensions between the aspirations outlined in the strategy and their presence within the organisational culture. Many thought a cultural shift driven by strong leadership and accompanied by structural and operational changes was needed to progress.

THE FOUR PILLARS

The **core pillars do resonate with staff** but there are opportunities for improvement in how they are interpreted and translated into practice.



Collegiality was most frequently mentioned by staff members, capturing both hopes and disappointments. Themes such as collaboration, a supportive work environment and a sense of community appeared across all questions.



Sustainability – some suggested the University can play to its strength in this area and that being a leader in sustainability would help differentiate Southampton from competitors. Staff thought this principle related well to the mission of changing the world for the better. Staff also found it easier to see how everyone could personally contribute to change in this area.



Internationalisation is polarising. While the majority supported the University's efforts to have global and local influence, some were critical of the current approach to recruitment of international students and some suggested there are many untapped opportunities for the university to play a more distinctive role in the local community.



Staff members generally agreed that **Quality** was important, and this principle resonated the most with students. However, some suggested that the challenge is defining and measuring this. While some preferred 'excellence' as a term, many were sceptical about using excellence-related external measures (such as REF, TEF or top 10 and top 100) to define and demonstrate quality.

Detailed Findings

WHAT MAKES SOUTHAMPTON DISTINCTIVE?



Research excellence and areas of expertise were most frequently mentioned as a distinguishing factor (by over a third of all respondents).

The strength of research is recognised as an area of strength across the community. For many, this excellence was concentrated in different pockets of expertise; most notably in areas such as marine sciences & oceanography, engineering, medicine and the arts.



Location was second – mentioned by almost a quarter of respondents.

Location was a strength – great transport links to major cities, presence in the city center, the coast, port, nature and a beautiful campus.



People and community ranked third, followed by reasons related to **reputation and rankings, the diversity of the educational offer and the campus.**

People who work at Southampton were often mentioned as a unique strength. A sense of community and friendly atmosphere were thought to be distinctive to the university.

However, 1 in 10 said they were not sure if the university was that distinctive – especially in comparison to other research-intensive institutions.

WHAT'S INSPIRING IN THE UNIVERSITY'S CURRENT VISION?



- The core principles resonated the most, especially **Collegiality**, which was mentioned by nearly a quarter of respondents.

Collegiality 24%	Sustainability 17%
Quality 16%	Internationalisation 9%



- The mission statement **'to change the world for the better'** was the second most popular element of the strategy.
- Changing the world was thought to be aspirational, impactful, reflective of the university's purpose and something that staff members wanted to see themselves contributing to.



However, nearly a fifth of respondents mentioned there was very little or nothing that inspired them and some expressed scepticism as to how inspiring the vision was:

- The **articulation of the strategy could be more inspiring**. They wanted the language to be less marketing or corporate-like.
- The goals - though good in principle - came across as **somewhat generic** and similar to what most universities were trying to achieve.
- The structure could be clearer, pointing out to **some confusion** between goals and means, vision and mission.

HOW TO MAKE THE VISION SPEAK TO EVERYONE

Around a fifth of responses highlighted the importance of **valuing and supporting staff** more. This potentially shows the need for more concrete actions rather than the articulation of the vision.

The need **to motivate all staff to commit to change** and enhancing **work relationships** were prominent themes.

Content: staff wanted the vision to be more people-centred

- Those on ERE pathways were more likely to suggest the support should focus on education.
- Many concentrated on the importance of enhancing community, collaboration and collegiality.

Reach: the objectives could be made more specific

- This included better linking to everyday actions and different job descriptions.
- Many commented on the importance of bottom-up contribution and staff involvement and that for some the vision might feel imposed from the top.

Language: many thought the vision could be articulated or expressed, including:

- Being bolder, more distinctive, and unique to Southampton.
- Reflecting societal and scholarly value rather than competition or performance.

ARE COLLEGIABILITY, QUALITY, INTERNATIONALISATION AND SUSTAINABILITY THE RIGHT PILLARS?

The majority were supportive of the four pillars, with only 9% saying that they are not right.

However, some were not sure if the pillars were well known, understood and enacted.

Suggestions revolved around the pillars being better articulated or rephrased, and that it was less about the exact words used and more about how they were interpreted and implemented in practice.

Quality, followed by Sustainability, were also considered the most important priorities by students.

Individual pillars elicited different responses

- Responses around Collegiality tended to highlight that a lot remains to be improved.
- Responses around Quality stressed barriers to implementation and improvement.
- Internationalisation was perhaps the most controversial and difficult to interpret.
- Responses around Sustainability tended to stress its importance.

All respondent types tended to agree that sentiments behind the pillars were right, but a significant minority suggested they could be rephrased or clarified

- Some thought Collegiality was uninspiring and Quality vague and difficult to measure.
- Internationalisation was mentioned by some as potentially in need of more significant redefining – not just when it comes to terminology but what actually the pillar encompassed.
- Sustainability should clearly distinguish between financial and environmental aspects.

Many offered other pillar suggestions, including:

- Equality, diversity and inclusion-related values.
- Excellence, flexibility, ambition, innovation, respect, creativity, adaptability, community.

HOW TO ARTICULATE AND ACHIEVE THE ASPIRATIONS TO BE A 'ONE SOUTHAMPTON' COMMUNITY?

The most prominent theme revolved around how Collegiality should be better **embedded in the organisational culture** – including changes to policies, creation of best practice frameworks, improvements to university-wide communications and opportunities to socialise.

Responses revealed perceptions that the University had a somewhat **divided and hierarchical culture** – with divisions across faculties, campuses and career pathways affecting Collegiality. Many wanted to overcome this to improve collaboration and teamwork.

Support and rewards

- Many responses expressed the desire that staff across faculties, career pathways and job roles be treated and supported equally (e.g. workload/appraisal system).
- Some felt that to truly improve Collegiality, it would need to be clearly defined, measured, incentivised and rewarded.
- Others pointed out to the important role of leadership in achieving this – leading by example, ensuring that the values filter down.

Collaboration

- Siloed working and the need for more collaboration between schools, faculties and campuses was frequently mentioned – many pointed to issues around centralisation of services and complex administrative processes.

Diversity

- Some questioned whether 'One Southampton' would be able to capture the true diversity of the community.

HOW TO MORE EFFECTIVELY EXPRESS THE AIM FOR DUAL EXCELLENCE IN RESEARCH AND EDUCATION?

The most frequently **suggested improvement** in this area related to **resolving tensions around valuing research and teaching differently**.

Many responses **did not necessarily answer the question** – tending to focus on resourcing and concrete actions that would support delivering excellent research and education.

43% of polled **students indicated Quality was a top priority**. This included general quality of education, research excellence and high reputation and rankings.

Balance between research and teaching

- For many, dual excellence was more dependent on better resourcing and incentivising staff rather than better expression or communication of this aim.
- Many also called for investing more into research (time, money, resources) and innovative teaching and student experience.
- References to REF Top 10 and Gold TEF gathered mixed reactions, with many pointing out the need to think beyond metrics – seeing them as results of quality and excellence but not aims in themselves.

Promotion and engagement

- While some thought this would need more substantial structural and operational changes, other thoughts that a lot could be gained by informing and engaging staff members better – for example, helping Professional Services understand how they contribute to dual excellence.
- More could also be done to promote excellent work completed in different areas of the University – internally and to external stakeholders.

SHOULD SOUTHAMPTON BE TRULY INTERNATIONAL AS WELL AS PLAY A CIVIC ROLE IN THE REGION?

Responses to the civic role were **very positive**, with many pointing out there are **fantastic opportunities in this area** – both in terms of contributing to the local community as well as partnerships with regional businesses and organisations.

External stakeholders (including alumni) tended to be in favour of internationalisation, especially the recruitment of international students, partnerships and focusing on the global research impact.

Many staff members were in favour of internationalisation. However, support was contingent upon what was actually meant by this – with some suggesting the approach, and potential consequences, needed to be rethought.

Impact of international recruitment

- Many respondents were concerned about too much reliance on China. Some pointed out this created tension as international travel wasn't environmentally sustainable.

Diverse culture

- Respondents suggested more could be done to attract diverse local students and widen participation. Many wanted Internationalisation to focus on building a more inclusive culture – not just in terms of attracting students and staff from other countries but championing diversity within the organisation.

Language

- Overall, it was agreed that the university was well placed to have a significant global and regional societal impact – encompassing its research, employment and educational roles.
- Some advised to avoid the false dichotomy between the two and thought the dual local-global focus could be expressed better – for example as public engagement on a regional and international level.

SHOULD THE STRATEGY BE MAPPED TO THE UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS?

The majority supported mapping the strategy to the UN Sustainable Development Goals, but opinions were divided as to whether some should be prioritised. Around a fifth of staff focused on practical implementation and some thought prioritisation would help with progress.

Issues around **climate action** were mentioned **most frequently** (around quarter of respondents mentioned support for this goal).

33% of polled students indicated Sustainability was an area the University should prioritise in the future.

Key goals

- Goal 13 – climate action was identified as a priority sustainability area.
- Goals 3 – good health and wellbeing, 4 – quality education, 5 – gender equality, 7 – clean and affordable energy and 12 – responsible production and consumption emerged were deemed more relevant than the rest.
- While many staff linked individual goals to specific areas of research expertise, goals 3, 4 and 5 were often linked to the need of improvement in these areas.

Implementation

- Many responses had a call to action tone and urged to concentrate or increase efforts in the following ways:
 - Individual behaviours (e.g. recycling and commuting to work)
 - Staff and student welfare
 - Operations (e.g. estates and international travel)
 - Research and education.

OTHER COMMENTS

- Staff members appreciated the opportunity to be involved in the consultation and they took the time to suggest many recommendations to improve and implement the strategy.
- However, comments were sometimes critical of how the university is run, especially in relation to how it impacts on staff.

Strategy and consultation

- Many wanted to see more commitment to implementation and better clarity as to how the strategy translates to job descriptions, processes and operations.
- Staff experience could be highlighted in the strategy better and staff involved more, and more transparently, in its development.
- Communication suggestions included showcasing research achievements and the strengths of the university to the public.

Work conditions and operations

- Many commented on issues around talent retention, feeling undervalued, and low satisfaction in such areas as promotion policies, administrative burden, and IT and HR systems.
- Siloed working and structural divisions were thought to negatively affect teamwork.

Governance, structure and management

- There was a sense of fatigue with constant restructuring and disappointment with governance but also some optimism surrounding the VC.
- Many wanted the senior management to lead by example and provide more transparency around how and why decisions are made.