

**UNABRIDGED VERSION of the feature article published in June
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**Seeking Excellence in Universities through Continuous
Improvement**

By Linda Martin, Institute of Hospitality (formerly HCIMA) Director of Programmes

In an increasingly competitive marketplace where the client is becoming ever more discerning, there is a priority need for residential and conference services departments in universities to exceed customer expectations by going the extra mile and achieving excellence in all that they do.

The good news for universities, with many embracing the commercial world as conference venues in addition to providing student residential services, is that this can be achieved with the aid of the Hospitality Assured Standard for delivering Service and Business Excellence. An increasing number of UK universities have now achieved the Hospitality Assured Standard – championed by the Institute of Hospitality (formerly HCIMA) – for their hospitality and conference services.

What is Hospitality Assured?

Hospitality Assured is a programme that recognises excellence in the service environment, which requires meeting the expectations of a range of customers on a consistent and regular basis. The Hospitality Assured framework will help organisations with:

- understanding customers' expectations
- planning the service delivery
- communicating the nature and rationale of the service
- ensuring adequate skills and resources are available
- instigating a process of improvement which becomes part of operations and self-perpetuating

Hospitality Assured is an industry standard that promotes and rewards the highest level of business and service excellence for organisations in the hospitality industry. The process for achieving Hospitality Assured recognition is rigorous. It is an ongoing process that provides a series of performance indicators against which an organisation can continually judge and measure itself. It is accepted, as standard practice, that Higher Education should assess its educational delivery and outcomes, so it makes sense that all aspects of a university's business should undertake an independent assessment that evaluates performance. In this way, organisations can be assured of performing to the highest levels in everything they do.

The Hospitality Assured Standard for Service and Business Excellence – fully endorsed by the British Quality Foundation and the Quality Scotland Foundation as meeting the criteria in the EFQM Excellence Model, owned by the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) –comprises 10 steps that will provide a robust programme for comparison and challenge.



Why is achieving Hospitality Assured so important?

The fact that Hospitality Assured does review customer satisfaction is critical. There is a considerable body of evidence that suggests customer satisfaction is the best predictor of financial performance in most markets. Recognising both service delivery as well as satisfaction and linking them to business performance, Hospitality Assured is a standard that says the most about a business – in respect of its ability to survive and grow in an ever competitive marketplace.

At the University of the West of England (UWE) in Bristol, the House Services department recognised that with the ever increasing competition between universities – not just locally but nationally and even internationally – there was a need to put UWE on the map by providing its students and visitors with a standard of service and business excellence. “With the completion of nearly 2,000 en-suite bedrooms on the main Frenchay Campus in September 2006, we realised that there was an opportunity for expanding our residential and

conference business,” explains Chris Abbott, UWE Head of House Services. “In line with this, we needed to raise our standards. Hospitality Assured seemed the perfect tool to use because it was industry-specific and based on the concept of ‘very best practice’ – providing a framework for improving business performance.

“Because Hospitality Assured is specifically geared towards the hospitality industry, it was the perfect tool to employ – especially in our conferencing and residential areas where we recognise that frequent changes in customer needs and expectations mean we have to be ahead of the game.”

Chris adds that using the Hospitality Assured tools as a measurement for success, the conference office set-up guaranteed standards, procedures and systems. Below are just some of the improvements that have been implemented as a direct result of the Hospitality Assured Accreditation:

- customer promise
- regularly benchmarking our services and facilities against our competitors
- action planning on our delegate/organiser/customer feed back received to assist with improvements to the service
- quarterly stats and feed back review which identifies the measurement of our services per quarter to establish the consistency and maintenance of our service
- working with the greener events initiative which actively promotes the organiser’s check list for venues identifying locally sourced, organic foods, Fair-trade products and public transport initiatives

Set in a 135 acre woodland campus – Royal Holloway, University of London (RHUL) at Egham in Surrey – continues to invest substantially in its infrastructure. Recent additions include a 400-seat lecture theatre; high specification en-suite bedrooms; and flexible, modern dining facilities, which are enjoyed by students, staff and visitors to the College. Alongside the enhanced facilities, there has been a programme to improve the service that conference organisers receive from the first moment they make contact with the College.

Commenting on how Hospitality Assured has helped RHUL, Tim Parry, RHUL Training Officer, says: “Firstly, Hospitality Assured has enabled RHUL to benchmark itself against the very best organisations, not just within the University sector, but across the hospitality industry as a whole, whilst also providing a framework that the team can use to evaluate how they can continue to flourish. Most importantly, by achieving accreditation, RHUL’s clients can be confident in its product and services – especially important for organisers who are using a university for the first-time.”

Simon Malloy FIH, Exeter University's Director of Hospitality Services, adds: "I have been a keen supporter of the Hospitality Assured initiative for a number of years and I have applied the principles of the Standard with great success in my previous workplace. When I started at the University of Exeter two years ago, I was, therefore, delighted that my new colleagues were enthusiastic about the benefits Hospitality Assured could bring and by the fact that they were clearly committed to improving all aspects of customer service delivery through the application of the Hospitality Assured model.

"Two years later, as a result of the enthusiasm, commitment and hard work on the part of all staff within Hospitality Services, we have been successfully accredited with Hospitality Assured. I am very pleased with this outcome, which confirms that the high standards of customer services provided by Hospitality Services, meet the high expectations of service delivery set by the Hospitality Assured accreditation.

"I can wholly recommend the HA accreditation process to other organisations that may be looking for a structured approach to the improvement of service standards in all respects."

How does continuous assessment help accredited organisations?

In March, the University of Brighton's Residential and Catering Services were successfully re-accredited for a fifth consecutive year – recording its highest overall Hospitality Assured score to date. "Right from our initial Hospitality Assured assessment in 2002, the service has shown continuous improvement in all areas of the standard," states David Hicks, University of Brighton's Catering Operations Manager. "There is little doubt that aiming for annual accreditation has been a catalyst for positive change within the RCS department and has been excellent for staff morale.

"Our association with the Hospitality Assured standard has also led to the introduction of a broad range of systems, policies and procedures – all of which have been important factors in improving the way we manage and operate the business. As a result, we have recorded consistently increasing levels of customer satisfaction over the corresponding period. The benefits have also been felt throughout the service where each and every member of staff has an important part to play in working towards successful accreditation. Their willingness to be a part of on-going service improvement, and the reward of seeing their hard work resulting in Hospitality Assured accreditation, has been excellent for morale.

"The Hospitality Assured logo is now used in all our promotional literature and is widely seen by both our customers and competitors as a mark of achievement and quality."

The Residential, Catering and Conference Services (RCCS) Department at Brunel University in West London, has achieved Hospitality Assured accreditation for four consecutive years and is currently in preparation for its 2007 assessment.

“Originally introduced into the department to integrate with our business procedures and our commitment to continuous customer service improvement, Hospitality Assured was the quality standard of choice,” explains Tony Davies, Brunel’s Training and Quality Manager. “The standard is now a key component of our business strategy in a department that provides services pivotal to the customer experience at Brunel. With over 400 staff in the department – responsible for the provision of most of the campus food and beverage facilities, allocating and managing all the student accommodation as well as the marketing of University facilities such as a new hotel and conference suite – the Standard gives us focus on a yearly basis to ensure our customers always experience an excellent service.”

How user-friendly is the Hospitality Assured process for first-time Hospitality Assured candidates?

Nick Leach MIH, Head of Catering Services at Portsmouth University, says: “The process leading to potential accreditation has been very straight forward and user-friendly. Once we had carried out a self-assessment on the ten key steps to service and business excellence, we have been audited against that and given an action plan to achieve before our full accreditation audit later in 2007.

“Portsmouth University was looking for a means of benchmarking its catering operation and gaining external recognition for its main campus catering and catered halls of residents. Having looked at several possible models, Hospitality Assured was chosen as it is endorsed by the British Quality Foundation as meeting the criteria in the EFQM excellence model. The standard promotes and rewards the highest standards of service in the hospitality industry and will ensure that you are seen to be one of the very best organisations in the hospitality industry by your customers, employees, stakeholders and competitors.”

Lindy Jessup MIH, Hospitality Services Manager at Southampton Solent University, adds: “Offering a high standard of customer care is at the heart of everything we do at the Southampton Solent University Conference Centre, whether it is for a small meeting or a large residential conference. We decided to strive for Hospitality Assured status, not just to provide re-assurance to potential customers in the level of service that they can expect to receive, but also for the benefits to be gained from the process itself, both for ourselves and current customers. It provides the opportunity and user-friendly framework to investigate customer needs in more detail and to establish how these can be met more closely. We take

pride in the service that we offer to our customers and Hospitality Assured status will be a badge of honour for our University's Conference Centre.”

- **Sharing Hospitality Assured Best Practice:** Lindy Jessup is happy to discuss the Hospitality Assured process in more detail with other Hospitality Assured organisations. Her contact details at Southampton Solent University are: Telephone: 023 8031 9602; or Email: conference.centre@solent.ac.uk.

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- Unabridged versions of the above interviews can be found on the Hospitality Assured website: www.hospitalityassured.com

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