

Kingston University
Elior caters for 25,430 students
2,515 members of staff
7 faculties - divided into schools
4 campuses in and around Kingston upon Thames
112-year history in further education
3 year +2 contract
Catering services provided since 1996

Kingston University has a 112 year history going back to 1899 when Kingston Technical Institute was opened. The modern day university operates seven faculties over four campuses in and around Kingston upon Thames, Surrey, with 25,430 students and 2515 members of staff.

Keeping the army of students and staff fed and watered is a full time task which is carried out by contract catering specialists, Elior (Avenance). The company is responsible for all the academic sites and provides 52 week operations with the largest two being seven days a week. In addition, within the largest two campuses, the LRC opens 24 hours for six months of the year and Elior (Avenance) provides catering through the learning cafes until 12:00 midnight at each campus. All the food served (hot, cold, salads, sandwiches, hospitality etc) is prepared on site using fresh ingredients and not bought in, frozen or chilled to reheat.

Richard Jewitt is Head of Support Services for Kingston University, "Students being students rarely give us any direct feedback unless they are really pushed (and at KU are trying to push them hard to tell us!), however when I joined in Nov 2004 the annual catering sales were around £1.2m for the year 2004-5. By 2009-10 sales were up to £2.65m. There have been a few selective price increases of around 5%, but otherwise prices have remained static. Given this huge increase in sales, it is clear that the services provided by Elior (Avenance) are highly valued by the students and staff and they are happy to spend their money at the University!"

Richard went on to say, "We have not encountered any issues or problems at all during the contract. KU and Elior (Avenance) have a long partnership history and both parties are able to talk openly to the other and work out what is best for the business and the university and to avoid any problems or upsets."

Richard added, "KU has invested heavily in the premises – refurbishing existing outlets and also adding new outlets where possible. We listened to the students about opening hours/days and then asked Elior (Avenance) to help us work out how specific demands could be met. As a result of the relationship we have given Elior (Avenance) more freedom to respond quickly to local requests without the need to wait for prior approvals. This has enabled new product lines to be introduced, changes in hospitality menus and freedom to

stay open one day longer for specific reasons. This arrangement works well and is much appreciated by the students and staff.”

In summary Richard said, “Overall, I would not hesitate to recommend Elior (Avenance) to other universities – they are certainly the catering experts, and, based on my experience here at Kingston, they have a wealth of knowledge and abundance of ideas that can help achieve the type of catering and hospitality that you need to keep students and staff happy. Every institution is different of course, and having done two EU tenders since I have been here (and Elior (Avenance) won them both) it is my opinion that the very big catering companies can appear to dazzle potential buyers with lots of lovely ideas and clever concepts that can catch the eye, but when pressed in our case they struggled to deliver what was actually wanted, the way we wanted and in the financial way we chose.”

Richard continued, “At KU we decided at the outset that we did not want the trading account to show a large surplus, preferring to keep prices lower and to attract greater volumes. This has, in fact, generated a surplus, but only because the catering is seen to be great value for money by the students and not because it has been priced to deliver a profit, nor operated in a way to cut costs. This has taken a few years to establish, but in 2004-5 there was a small trading surplus plus a light equipment budget – which when added together meant a subsidy of approximately £95k pa. We then introduced a heavy equipment budget of £85k pa, increasing the subsidy to between £150k - £160k pa.

Richard revealed, “In 2010-11, we are looking at a trading surplus of £185k pa inc light equipment which will cover the maintenance budget of £55k pa and the heavy equipment budget of £85k pa and bring a return to KU of £45k – a huge turnaround in the financial situation, and one that has only been possible through working closely with Elior (Avenance) and with KU having the foresight and confidence to wait for a year or two for it all to come together as a plan in a way that we are happy with.”

Finally Richard concluded, “I do not believe there are quick fixes to this type of service. There needs to be a plan developed over several years to deliver what is wanted and I would encourage any University to think what that plan is, and to ask Elior (Avenance) to help deliver it.