

“It’s the best job in the world”: Alison Shedlock looks back on 21 years at the University

After more than two decades with Estates, meets and looks after its campus, Director of Campus Services Alison Shedlock is stepping back from her full-time role, but she’s not quite leaving us just yet.

When Alison arrived in January 2005, one campus coffee outlet in the Schuster Building was, in her words, “a hole in the wall with a tin of Nescafé and an urn with a spoon on a chain.” Things have moved on a bit since then.

From catering to Campus Services

Alison joined as General Manager for Catering, a newly created role with a brief to deliver a new catering strategy and £1.5 million of cafe refurbishments. She oversaw the move from the Refectory, now the Alan Gilbert Learning Commons, into University Place, and led the insourcing of catering from Chartwells.

She then became Head of Hospitality and Events in 2012, taking on the conference venues and Chancellors Hotel. In 2020, she became Director of Campus Services, with car parking and House Services added to her portfolio. She has also served as a non-executive director of TUCO, the university caterers’ organisation.

“I came thinking I’d stay for five years and see what happens,” she says. “But there’s always a project, always something happening that keeps it exciting. I’m not one for standing still.”

A hat for everything

“You have to have a hat for everything,” Alison says of her role. “We’ll feed anything from a bacon butty in the morning to fine dining for a high-value guest.”

That flexibility was tested most during Covid-19, when her teams set up and ran four test centres and found new ways to feed students isolating in halls. “I’ve never worked so hard in my life. But the people made it happen.”

The engine room

“Campus Services is the engine room of the University,” she says. “We make it happen, quietly, behind the scenes.” It has a pastoral side too: cafe staff whom students confide in, and hall teams who become “like an extended family.”

She’s quick to point out that the work goes beyond clean lecture theatres and a decent coffee.

“There’s a soft, pastoral side too.” She mentions Emma, who runs the cafe in Chemistry and whom students know by name and confide in. She mentions catered hall staff, who become “like an extended family” to students. And she mentions Queenie and Doris in the Beyer Building, who leave little plants in offices, sometimes with a note saying *don’t move me, I’m just getting some fresh air*. “That’s such love and care for their environment,” she says.

A sustainable legacy

Alison's commitment to sustainability is visible across campus. The reusable Bee Cup has cut the share of hot drinks served in disposable cups from around 75% to about 35%, and has spread to Manchester Met. Her teams were part of turning the Old Quad from a car park into a green space, and the University holds a three-star Sustainable Restaurant Association rating and Fairtrade recognition.

What she's proudest of is that sustainability is now her teams' instinct: House Services is trialling an ionised-water cleaning method that could cut chemical use by around 90%. "For me, the biggest legacy is that my team think like that now," she says. "They don't need me to tell them. They just need me as a leader to say: yes, go and do it."

It's all about the people

What the question, Alison's answer kept coming back to people. Reflecting on her career, she said: "It's the variety and the people that make it the best job in the world. I've met the most amazing people, and some of them I now call friends."

She's keen to thank the directors who backed her: Andrew Yates, her original director; Mike Shore-Nye; Diana Hampson; and Barra Mac Ruairí. She also thanks her team and the colleagues across the University who have "championed what we do, and championed me."

For anyone starting out in Estates and Facilities, at any level, she recommends building connections across the whole institution: "Get to know people. It makes your life so much easier when you know who to call, whatever job you're doing."

What's next

Alison is staying with us a part-time Strategic Advisor to our incoming operational leaders and will be progressing some key pieces of work that are important to this Directorate, helping to lay the foundations for our new directors.

Beyond that, she plans to convert a camper van and explore Scotland, Ireland, Wales and England and spend more time with family.

Barra Mac Ruairí, Chief Property Officer, said: "Over the last two decades, Alison's work has been a part of everyday campus life for both students and colleagues. On behalf of the Directorate, I'd like to thank her for everything she has brought, and I'm glad we'll be able to keep her expertise for a little longer."

We wish Alison all the best for her next chapter, and plenty of open road for her camper van journeys.

