

u+we in solidarity

Newsletter of UWE Branch of the UCU

30th November 2012

An Open Letter to the Vice Chancellor

Dear Professor West,

We are writing to you at the behest of members who have complained about the recent VC Update (October 2012). Whilst claiming that you have “managed and delivered significant change”, you say that only some staff are passionate about their subject, that the data about “lower performing” programmes makes “stark reading”, and that “we need to respect each other and work together to deliver solutions”.

You have been in charge of the University for half a decade and have made your intention clear that the changes implemented are meant to drive the University up the league tables. When we move in the opposite direction, rather than consider that perhaps your policies have not been successful, you seem to be putting the blame largely on your staff.

The staff surveys that UCU and the University have conducted suggest a contrary perspective: that staff are demoralised by endless restructuring, by changes that are detrimental to the effectiveness and reputation of the University, and by a top-down management style that does not respond to the needs and concerns of front line staff. Immediate action is required in order to turn things round. Our analysis of the problems at UWE is given below.

We call for:

- The Board of Governors to be fully involved and to understand the issues that concern staff. At least two of the Board to be drawn from staff;
- A six month moratorium on further change until genuine consultation has been completed;
- Teaching to be adequately resourced;
- The workload model to be renegotiated accordingly. It is recognised that current arrangements offer some benefits, however the relief provided is not sufficient to alleviate undue stress on many staff.
- New posts to be filled from within UWE. Where internal interviews fail to find a suitable candidate, recent industrial experience should not be a requirement.

Analysis

The problems of the university can be addressed by reference to various sections of the VC Update. In the paragraph headed "What can we do?", you make the point (with which no-one will disagree) that we owe it to our students to deliver the highest quality education and professional services we can. In practice, however, we find examples like the recent introduction of a personal tutor scheme which barely meets the minimum requirements outlined by the National Union of Students. Meanwhile, a successful essay writing workshop, based in the former faculty of HLSS but attracting students from all over the University, was allowed to lapse despite an offer to develop it into a Writing Centre similar to those established at some of our competitor universities

Under "Organisational changes", you say: "I and the Board of Governors are determined to deliver investment in areas where we can see potential for growth, improvement and strength. We will not invest in areas where this is not evident." The staff experience is that this investment is not necessarily based upon measurable performance or outcomes, but upon simplistic ideas of what is expected to appeal to students. For example, the recent message to staff from Professor Gough about submissions to the 2014 REF speaks of the outstanding internationally recognised research profile of Culture and Media Studies in the 2008 RAE. It is hard for staff on the ground to understand why such an internationally esteemed department should have been reduced to a rump on the basis of ill-informed ideas about the need to attract students through vocational media practice.

These ill-advised changes within the "creative industries" were not even carried out effectively. Last year we promised prospective students sparkling new facilities on the Frenchay site which have not materialised. This year's last minute decision to send half of ACE down to Bower Ashton from St Matthias led to students having to be provided with new housing; to extraordinary delays in the preparation of teaching accommodation and equipment provision; and to a bad effect on the morale of both cohorts. The teaching staff have to carry the can when students complain. You have refused requests that you directly

address students when such changes are made, so that lecturing staff are not left trying to explain detriments over which they have had no control.

Under "what do you expect from a Senior Management Team?", you say that the SMT want to better understand how we can support and improve all aspects of life at UWE. The answers clearly lie in the various staff surveys have been undertaken both by UCU and by the University. We ask you to take seriously the feeling of staff that consultations are mere gestures; that they cannot support the direction in which the university's values seem to be moving; that staff spend so much time trying to adjust to constantly changing departments and faculties and procedures that there is insufficient time for them to spend on the things that really count in a university – teaching, preparation, learning and assessment.

The great majority of staff work hard to keep the university going, despite intense institutional instability. They do this despite the fact that admin staff are removed (notwithstanding the OUA, the implementation of which at least some faculty managers admit has been a disaster), Heads of Department change yearly, school and faculty names change almost monthly (in some places but not others – something that the web site notoriously fails to keep up with and everyone finds confusing). They do this despite the regular threats of redundancies and course closures. They do this despite management manipulations (occasionally bordering on bullying) as your team are given ever more impossible tasks to achieve. They do this despite ever fewer resources. They do this despite the continual talk of campus closures amid botched moves. They do this as they work ridiculously long hours while being told that they are "under-bundled".

With regard to the announcement of the new football stadium, it feels contemptuous in the extreme to be told that we'll have fewer resources, fewer staff, and fewer modules to teach, that there would be a new round of redundancies, but that we are supposed to be happy that £25,000,000 is to be spent on a football stadium. We cannot understand how you are surprised that there are problems when property development has priority over resourcing the main thing that students come to university for: to learn.

Discontent amongst our members – and indeed amongst non-members – is now so widespread that urgent steps are necessary to avoid a crisis of confidence that will severely damage the soul and reputation of the entire institution. The key need is for managers at every level to recognise that they are helping to run a university, rather than the third-rate degree mill that UWE is in danger of becoming. This means ceasing to regard learning as a commodity, students as customers, and colleagues as an industrial workforce. Colleagues should be relieved of the insult of having their time – the professional time that they have traditionally given in abundance – calculated as 'bundles' of work. Students should be offered properly resourced personal tutoring. Academic programmes should not be funded purely on a utilitarian calculus of vocational relevance – a value that changes over time and does not allow for the fact that many students attend university in order to discover possibilities in life that they have not yet imagined. We offer this analysis in a positive spirit to address the real difficulties at UWE.

Yours sincerely

Terryl Bacon,
Branch Chair,

on behalf of the Executive and members of UCU at
UWE