

Where is the University Going?

Spring
2014

The University Strategy: The Price of Everything...

The VC's message of the 6th May about strategy seems to be worryingly disconnected from what is actually happening in his institution. **The University of Sheffield has changed course sharply already on his watch. It is now sailing full steam ahead towards corporatism and away from collegiality.**



As he said very eloquently when he arrived, the University is primarily the people in it. It is a truism that the staff and their relationship with the institution form the bedrock on which any strategy is built.

So what is that relationship and how is it changing? **The University's historic strengths have been a strong collegial and supportive approach in comparison with other similar institutions. Many staff have come here for precisely that reason. Unfortunately this invaluable asset is being thrown away by the VC and UEB.**

Some examples:

- The University has halved the future pensions for lower paid staff, leading the sector in attacking pensions. These staff are much more likely to be from Sheffield and to stay in Sheffield, and the University is one of the largest employers, so the long term effects on the city's elderly population will be profound.
- The University has set up a wholly-owned subsidiary, Unicus, with the sole aim of paying staff below the bottom of the University pay scales and without the decent conditions which we have won.
- The University has given the VC a 26% pay rise in a single year and given the second highest earner an 8 to 17% rise. There are regular stories in the press about the greed of

the University's management. 'How others see us', as Sir Keith puts it.

- Meanwhile the University has stood solidly with the rest of the sector in driving down real wages for staff by over 13%.
- The University is reviewing its 'reward' strategy (what is wrong with 'pay'?) and there is a strong performance-related-pay steer to it, in spite of all the evidence that this actually depresses performance and is destructive for morale. In particular they have not ruled out stopping automatic increments, which are part of the national pay framework. Increments at the whim of managers is of course a recipe for stress and resentment all round and is at worst a bullies charter. It is absolutely unacceptable to the Trades Unions and hopefully sense will prevail and this idea will simply be dropped, but why is it being floated at all?
- The Director of HR was quoted publicly as saying that anyone who consistently fails to 'excel' will 'have to leave the organisation'. Apart from the logical absurdity of everyone having to excel, what does that say about senior management's attitude to staff? We are indeed just 'human resources'.
- And in its approach to the city, the University is getting rid of the core of its lifelong learning provision, ie evening learning, because it 'does not fit within the financial envelope' - an envelope which is of course defined by the VC and UEB. This is, or was, a valuable flagship service to Sheffield citizens.

All is certainly not lost. In reality the University is still to a large extent a collegial environment and in spite of all the pressures most staff still hold on to a real commitment to the learning & teaching and research that the University community is here for. And on the trades union side we have worked constructively with HR colleagues on many issues.

But meanwhile the workloads increase and the University's reserves pile higher. Would an alternative strategy not be better? Steering the ship back towards collegiality and co-operation, working together in a supportive environment? The imaginative approaches the VC wants flourish best in an environment where people are not watching their backs, and have the space to think.

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Business Cases and Business Plans in Research

The last few decades have seen a big change in the way research is funded. There has been a huge increase in research funding, which should be a good thing for researchers. However the academic income model has moved from funding teaching positions to funding research projects and many university managements have not yet figured out how to optimally balance this type of uncertain income with a stable, productive environment suitable to maximising REF scores.

Some senior voices in management stick to an outdated and inefficient view of research careers being a temporary stepping stone to teaching careers. In this model, researchers give no long-term commitment to their teams, have no incentive to share knowledge and skills, and compete against their lab “mates” to get on the next grant or to a teaching role. Co-authorship is discouraged, wheels are endlessly re-invented within each lab. Staff are churned for no clear reason every time some particular project income stream stops, and in preparation for this, they are spending up to half their office time during a project on developing non-project skills and applying for jobs elsewhere. It is becoming hard for some of these dysfunctional teams to compete for grants against labs who churn less and are able to list large researcher teams with 10 years' working together experience in their bids.

It doesn't have to be this way. The real world is full of organisations that also derive all their income from temporary projects, but know how to balance this uncertain income with their fixed staff costs. Management and IT consultancies, investment banks, drug contract research organisations, engineering contractors, and plane manufacturers all do this – not from the kindness of their hearts to their staff but because it is the best way to get project work done and improves their bottom lines. Remember Joe from the TV series “This Life” – the guy who assigns briefcases full of project work to the lawyers upstairs every time new jobs comes in? He doesn't go round making them redundant every time a project finishes. Some contract research companies such as BAE, QinetiQ, and clinical trials companies have even worked as partners on the SAME research projects as university researchers, but employing their own staff properly. In other cases, university bids to deliver contract research have been beaten by companies who have offered more experienced and stable teams as part of their proposals. Project Risk Management is not rocket science, and if you speak to anyone from these organisations they will tell you about standard concepts such as worker utilization rates (which typically range from 60-90%) and being “on the bench”. On-the-bench workers do the most important work of the whole firm between projects: the hot-end, income generation activities of writing, managing, and selling future bids. (They also do their Continued Professional Development then, rather than have it cut into time during running projects.) Projects are costed at Full Economic Costing (FEC), which is defined to cover the value of the risk incurred due to uncertain project income streams. This value can be quantified, and learning how to do this is standard fare on most MBA courses. Interestingly, some universities do build in FEC costs to many proposals now, but the money seems to vanish somewhere before it gets to the bridging funds that the funders designed it to be used for.

Research work is no longer a temporary stepping stone to teaching – around 5/6 of academic salary funding is now for purely research work, with only 1/6 for research-and-

teaching work. In research-led universities it is now a 150 million pounds-a-year business. Research has become professionalised in its own right in some institutions, but others need to create a much, much better environment to compete with them. Progressive universities such as Oxford, Cambridge and City University have bridging funds designed to create stable research environments. In many fields such as biotech and computer science, we are being beaten to publications and bids by private companies, and are also losing staff to them due to their better research environments. We no longer recruit the best researchers – they now go elsewhere – but instead we recruit the people who are most willing to sacrifice their family lives to relocate every few years. To compete externally we need to build larger, more stable teams, who are incentivised to help one another rather than fight internally. Leeds has designed enhanced redundancy packages to discourage managers from making redundancies and help to keep teams together long term. (Fellowship schemes and lone-wolf “independent researchers” are not necessarily helpful when a competitor university has a well-organised and happy team of 20 researchers bidding against you.) Larger, supportive teams are able to write bids for each other, and maintain continuity of complex technical systems over decades, which is needed to compete with other bidders that already have those systems. Happier staff can spend 100% (or more realistically, 150%) of their paid office hours doing the work they genuinely love, rather than constantly job-applying, reinventing wheels, and back-stabbing. Strong, stable professional research teams can build international reputations, boost REF scores, and ultimately attract both research income and increased international student fees through this reputation. But there is no incentive for any of this under the old-fashioned system that assumes it will make everyone redundant every four years.

Some researchers have invested their own time thinking about private ways that these optimisations could be achieved, to benefit themselves rather than their universities. If management insists on using inefficient employment practices, then this should create some kind of arbitrage opportunity to compete against them. While some bid-making is restricted by law to the public universities' oligopoly, there are now many funding agencies that can now be approached without using a university affiliation. Rather than write these grants for their university, researchers can apply directly as themselves, or by spending 100 pounds on forming a private shell company. In this way we can compete against our university for these bids, and use the FEC parts of them for its intended purpose of creating our own private bridging funds. Other researchers are working as private tutors, using time that would have otherwise been spend on out-of-hours university research, tutoring international students to compete against their universities' own offerings. Others fill their weekends with private, undeclared consulting to hedge against redundancy, instead of doing extra work for their university for free. Researchers do love their subjects and would be able to do much more out of hours work within the university out of goodwill if they were not pursuing such outside distractions.

The obvious economic action is simply to leave and move to another university or company having a better professional research career environment – and many researchers have already done this. There are many other options out there. In the long term we will see a process of evolution, the universities offering the most stable environments will produce the best output, attract the best

people, and win funding away from their competitors. Bristol already seems to attract researchers in this way. However real economies -- unlike their undergrad textbook counterparts -- include partners, children, elderly relatives and other caring responsibilities, which lead to a stickiness of location. That is why researchers should sometimes help to improve their current employer via a union, or create ways to compete against it in the same location, rather than just walk away.

Creating a stable, professional research environment is clearly in research-led universities' overall business interests, as it will improve research output, REF scores, and teaching income at little or no cost. Project-based staff at real-world project-based companies often describe our current churn-based practice as "insane" for this reason. Who, then, is blocking the obvious change if both

researchers and management are on the same side here? The answer appears to be (as usual in organisational inefficiencies) a middle-management agency conflict. Faculty and department boards are comprised of open-ended teaching staff with personal, rather than institutional, interests in keeping professional researchers casualised. While hurting university output as a whole, these individuals boost their own job security and reputations by fashioning themselves as the only expert in some field, and churning any underling who threatens this position. **Professional university management and professional career researchers need to work together to reduce this agency conflict and create a more efficient and stable research environments. And the first universities to do this should expect to gain a huge advantage in research output over their competitors.**

Pay, Reward and Recognition

With the recent pay award dispute barely completed, Sheffield is racing ahead with a Reward and Recognition review. If you completed the Staff Survey in the Spring there were some questions asking about what you see as reward and recognition. What are our thoughts? Fundamentally, there's the need for fair, equal and transparent remuneration for the work we do. We have nationally negotiated pay scales that play a major role in maintaining those principles, including the recognition of increased experience and responsibilities in a role through annual increments. Alongside collective bargaining across HEIs, which with our recent strike action has won us an, albeit modest, 2014/15 pay offer of 2% that is at least a step in the right direction against a backdrop of several years of annual pay cuts in real terms.

Let's focus for a moment on reward, or should we say remuneration? Whatever our roles are we should earn fair pay for completing our work. We certainly don't expect a one-trick reward on a whim to make us happy at work. It's key to remember that all our jobs are important and valuable to the organisation and that the importance of a role is not directly correlated to an increasing salary. In what is claimed to be 'a remarkable place to work', we remark that our VC earns over 27 times more than a staff member on Grade 1 starting a new job today. Where do we see that clarity, fairness and transparency, not just at the very top, but with the growing pool of top level managers each of whom will earn in a matter of days what most of us earn in a month?

How do you want to be recognised for the work that you do? A fair salary surely is a fundamental benchmark? As our top level management recognises and rewards itself behind closed doors, how can we have fair recognition for all staff in a transparent and planned way? Getting shopping vouchers and being able to get in on Juice are cheap niceties. Call us old fashioned but we'd rather be treated like adults and allowed to choose how we reward ourselves rather than break down that virtual barrier between our personal and work lives.

And on the matter of recognition, what about the huge number of zero-hour casualised workers? Our most vulnerable no-frills workforce, are not seen as Staff, have no proper annual leave, no proper sick pay and no guarantee of work and worst of all no access to shopping perks and Juice! Once again, we find it remarkable that Bank Workers weren't permitted to complete the Staff Survey.

So let's hope the new reward and recognition strategy, which SUCU are negotiating on your behalf alongside our sister campus unions, can have a truly fair and transparent implementation for both the VC and Bank Workers and for everyone in between. **Let Sheffield lead the way in truly valuing all of our roles collectively and with respect for each other working together.** We should support the Student Union's newly passed 10:1 pay ratio policy, to lobby the University not to pay the highest paid staff more than ten times the lowest paid.

Professorial Pay

The spectre of performance-related pay in Higher Education constantly haunts UCU negotiators. Currently UCU negotiates and scrutinises the pay scale and its implementation for grades 6-9, while Professorial pay is set without such scrutiny. This results in a procedure that is open to arbitrariness and manipulation and is devoid of any meaningful transparency.

Professorial increments are not automatic, but need to be applied for and a case made for support. The Professor writes a short case for uplift and the Head of Department makes a similar statement in support or not, however the Head judges the matter. The applicant has no right to check this for accuracy or fairness, and in order to see this statement the applicant must request it under the Data Protection Act after the process is complete. The two statements, along with the Professor's CV, then go to the Faculty PVC, who presents the case to a Professorial Salary Review meeting. Enquires reveal that for the 2013-

14 round, 163 cases were decided at a single meeting of approximately 3 hours duration, meaning that on average just over one minute was dedicated to each case. No minutes of the meeting are taken and the Professor receives only a letter stating the panel decision. The Professor may discuss the matter with the relevant FPVC, but there is no written record of this, and there is no opportunity for appeal under any circumstances.

Clearly this process is open to arbitrary decisions or even abuse by Heads, FPVCs or other members of the committee who might wish to reward or punish a given Professor. This system needs to be replaced by a transparent and accountable process, and SUCU will campaign around the issue. It also provides another reason why we need to resist all shifts towards performance-related pay for other grades, on top of the divisive nature and embittering of working relations that such systems involve.

Exceptionally Bad

Members may be intrigued to read the musings of Andy Dodman, director of HR, in the *People Management* magazine. Summing up HR's new performance management strategy, he explained: "What is more challenging is what to do with people who have tried and tried but are just never going to be exceptional," he says. "We will do what we can to find people a role where they can excel but, if they can't, then I think they will have to leave the organisation."



Now we all want to do our jobs well, but there's a big problem when "exceptional" becomes the norm and the alternative is being forced out of a job. What happens if your research doesn't go well one year, or you have family problems that affect your work, or the team you manage hits a rocky patch? From the sound of Dodman's interview,

managing competently to deal with tough circumstances won't be good enough. And that's deeply worrying. As is the fact that the very concept of exceptionality is predicated on the definition of oneself *against* other less exceptional colleagues, as we find ourselves in competition with each other to prove ourselves as the exception and everyone else as merely ordinary...

Moreover, the logic underlying this terminology is also deeply flawed. In the Oxford dictionary, "exceptional" is defined as *unusual; not typical*. So if, in order to keep our jobs, we all managed to become exceptional, this state of affairs would then constitute the new normal and therefore no longer be exceptional. Consequently, we would all then have to strive even harder to become even more unusually good at our jobs. And so on. And so on. It's not hard to imagine a terminal point at which this state of exceptionality becomes so refined that only a few individuals are able to achieve it. These individuals would then have to deliver all the activities of the University single-handed; being unexceptional, all of their more typical colleagues would, by this stage, have left the organisation...

In real life of course, no-one is exceptional all the time. We think everyone should be given the best opportunity to excel – but there are all sorts of reasons why things might not work out that way. A strategy that puts all the burden of excellence on individuals, and fails to recognise that this is an institution that runs on teamwork and collaboration is not one we want to see at Sheffield.

LET THEM DRINK JUICE!

A guest column from Captain JuiceMaster™

There was a time, before Sheffield's Civic University was converted into a glorious corporate enterprise, when a staff member who needed support for stress and anxiety could go and talk to somebody other than their manager. This rather daft arrangement was called the counselling service. And now? Well, now, staff under stress can simply go and Juice themselves. The counselling service was outsourced. Yes, of course the employer has a duty of care to staff, but remember: we live in times of austerity (which we are all in together), and, after all, there is no such thing as a free care encounter.

Can you feel the Juice?! What is Juice? Juice is the employer's branded campaign for staff wellbeing. As the web-page says, "Health and wellbeing is at the heart of our employment offer". Yay! Go Juice! If you have the time, you might wish to browse Juice's "15 Ways to boost your wellbeing", one of which is to "Shop until you drop", and another "Dustercise", which means cleaning your house or car. [Are we sure we are not making this up? Ed.]

So, now, if you are silly enough to allow yourself to get stressed to a point beyond which Juice's choral singing and Pilates can no longer help, guess what? ... You can phone a call centre! And, if you manage to persuade the call centre staff that your problem actually warrants some

proper attention, you can even get a voucher for some counselling. It's so simple! Like Walmart vouchers - remember "shop till you drop"? And don't worry if you don't get to speak to the same person each time you call. What did you expect? It's a call centre, for goodness sake. Get over it! This is mass, mental, healthcare, operationalised through low cost outsourcing, like a Walmart version of the NHS. Even if you imagine yourself to be driven to desperation and illness by work-related stress, at least have the decency to acknowledge that this is slick business process engineering. That's why it's up for three national awards, duh!

Folks, isn't it good to know that UEB and HR have your wellbeing in their hands? That's at the heart of the employment offer.

Cue jingle and logo ... and we're done. Juice, anyone?! I feel my Juice coming on.

