

Important information for UCU members at Lancaster University

Your Union on Campus

June 2012

Does VC's Decision-Making Herald Start of New Era?

Members will have seen the recent messages from the Vice Chancellor indicating that the Business Process Review (BPR) was going to be arrested and reviewed so that the University could assess the lessons of the BPR so far; and that the plans for a merger or federation with the University of Liverpool were being shelved. Like many members of the University community, we are relieved by these decisions.

Some have commented that, while the decisions are welcome, it is easier to admit a predecessor's mistakes, whereas the real test of maturity for the VC will come only when he considers whether to admit one of his own. However, we should not ignore that reversing an established administrative course is in itself a sign of wisdom and good sense: it might have been just as easy to insist stubbornly on going forward with flawed plans and the VC deserves credit for being willing to turn the University "ship" around—not necessarily an easy thing in a vessel of this size with a good deal of bureaucratic ballast and inertia.

In halting the Liverpool merger, also deserving of credit are the academic colleagues who provided cogent arguments that "research power" was not necessarily the sole measure by which the merits of the merger should be judged. There is no need to repeat the technical arguments here, and it is by no means certain which particular factor changed decision-makers' minds, but the presentation of a fact-based argument against the proposal certainly provided a solid basis for reasoned discussion.

Regarding the BPR in the Faculty of Science and Technology, those directly affected were not for the most part UCU members and so we were not directly involved in representing members there, but we gather that some employees were placed in very difficult predicaments: some departmental staff with finance-related responsibilities were given a very short time to choose between remaining in their current departmental roles or being moved to a centralised office dealing with finance matters, without being fully informed about the details of either role. Heads of Department were not involved at a sufficiently early stage in the deliberations and many objected. Just as student objections stayed management's hand in centralising some of the

student-facing functions of departmental administrative staff in the admin BPR, HoDs' objections to the BPR in Science and Technology seem to have made a significant difference to the progress of the plans.

We should remain alert to the problems that may still arise, though. Some parts of the BPR were too far advanced to be halted, namely the Finance and Procurement strand. Elsewhere there are still hazards: the arresting of the BPR does not mean that all the reorganisation that had been going on under its auspices will halt. What has been removed, though, is the BPR's overarching framework, the elimination of which may give rise to problems. We now need to be more alert than ever about the process of local restructurings and reorganisations.

The University's embarking on a review process about the BPR is a good thing that befits an institution dedicated to learning. We think this willingness to take on board lessons and perhaps admit mistakes would benefit all of its divisions. As members recall, a year ago UCU declared that the University had breached the agreed procedures on Discipline, Capability, and Grievances, and we joined a review of the operation of those procedures together with our partner unions and management. In the summer, a UCU general meeting stipulated that successful completion of the review of those three procedures was a condition for accepting the proposed redundancy procedure (whose details are even now being finalised through negotiation). Unfortunately, management withdrew from the joint review procedure and, from September 2011 to April 2012, meetings between UCU and management took place at the snail's pace of approximately one every three to four months.

There are hopeful signs that a new attitude and an infusion of new blood in the Human Resources Division has been instrumental in getting those discussions going again—and it has been over a year since UCU asked for the review to begin! With luck, the maturity and wise leadership—not to say the humility—of our new VC has rubbed off on his colleagues, since all we are asking for is an honest recognition of past mistakes. After all, there's not much point in agreeing a carefully crafted set of procedures unless all parties accept and abide by their provisions.

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Social Media—Protect Yourself

In 2007, the TUC described the UK's then 3.5 million Facebook users as "3.5 million HR [Human Resources] accidents waiting to happen". Since then, the Labour Research Department (LRD) reports that the number of users has multiplied many times over (now at 900 million) as the vast majority of people on line are social media users. The LRD provides workplace guidelines, most of the cases it cites involving employer monitoring and disciplinary actions (some leading to dismissal) resulting from comments employees posted about their workplaces on social media sites.

The guidelines on the use of social media are generic, though, and do not address some of the work-related issues that arise in the academic setting. What if you are careful not to "friend" students but one of your social media friends is not so choosy? You may have to reset your privacy settings. What policies and procedures are in place to ensure that universities meet their Duty of Care to front-line staff in the fulfilment of their academic work if they are misrepresented or abused online? This question has been raised at Senate and Lancaster UCU has been looking into it. What if a group of students working on a project set up a Facebook group and something goes wrong that impinges on the assessed work of one of them? How far does academic responsibility reach? These are just some of the questions that have arisen at Lancaster University and that our members have raised, and yet there appears to be a gap in policies and guidelines for higher education institutions—a problem that Lancaster UCU is tackling by gathering information about relevant policies at institutions around the country.

What of experiences in other academic settings? A recent NASUWT (the largest teachers' union) survey found that many pupils were routinely using social media to abuse teachers online. Although the vast majority of teachers had reported the incidents, many felt they were not supported properly, their complaint had not been taken seriously enough, and in too many cases the action taken didn't reflect the seriousness of the abuse. The survey concluded that senior management must ensure that proper procedures are in place to protect staff and complaints about online abuse are taken seriously. Are there similar problems in higher education?

Our results to date indicate that many universities are either in the early stages of formulating (or updating existing) social media policies which serve to protect and promote the institutional brand. For those universities which at least appreciate that the explosive use of social media necessitates some protective and consequential measures for staff and students, these tended to rely upon the flexibility of existing catch-all policies. Few institutions appear to have considered the need for clear guidance, codes of practice, behavioural standards and actionable consequences of online misuse/abuse by which to meet their Duty of Care towards staff.

One institution does stand out though and that is the Open University, which has the third highest number of Twitter followers and fourth highest number of Facebook fans of all European HE institutions. Given that it has such a large online presence, it is somewhat unsurprising that it has attempted to grasp the nettle and provide clarity of thought to the complexity and

consequences of social media – including the recognition that any guidelines developed today, will (in some cases) be inappropriate tomorrow.

So, what can you do to protect yourself and your academic reputation online?

Top Tips

- Keep your friends close - ensure your privacy settings (e.g. Facebook) are set to 'Friends-only' and don't 'friend' students on your personal accounts
- Exercise caution if making comments about work or colleagues: better yet, don't make any comments
- Don't release personal data about yourself or others
- Monitor and manage your online presence (e.g. via Google alerts and searches) and take action if and as required
- Save screen shots of offending comments and site content
- Report abuse to the site owner/provider and request the content is removed and the user is blocked
- Report abuse/misrepresentation to the university authorities and monitor the action being taken

We'd be interested to receive any comments, questions or examples where behavioural guidelines or a policy on social media at Lancaster University might prove helpful. Please feed information via the LUCU Branch Administrator (LBanton@ucu.org.uk)

Report on REF Open Discussion

An open discussion on the Research Excellence Framework (REF) was held recently at Lancaster which proved a useful insight into the national arrangements and the local approach to the forthcoming exercise. The two speakers who addressed the audience were Professor Lucas Introna (LUMS and member of REF Steering Group) and Stefano Fella (UCU National Policy Advisory Team).

Background Reminder

The REF is the new system for assessing the quality of research in UK higher education institutions (HEIs) and replaces the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE), last completed in 2008. HEIs will be invited to make submissions which must be returned by 29th November 2013. The results will be published in December 2014 and will inform the allocation of research funding by the UK higher education funding bodies, from 2015-16.

Equality and Diversity in the REF

The UK funding bodies state that they are committed to supporting and promoting equality and diversity in research careers and arrangements are consequently being put in place to enable staff whose circumstances have constrained their ability to return four or more out-puts to be included in the REF with fewer than four outputs, without penalty. A national Equality and Diversity Advisory Panel has been established to advise the REF panels and funding bodies on the implementation of equality measures and each HEI has to develop and submit an institutional code of practice to ensure the fair and transparent selection of staff. These codes of practice need to be submitted by the end of July 2012 and HEIs will be informed as to whether their code of practice is acceptable or not. If an

institution is subsequently seen not to be adhering to its submitted Code of Practice then financial penalties will follow.

The National Picture

Nationally, UCU have taken a principled opposition to the REF on the selection of staff and the use of output performance measures (as opposed to the holistic contribution of staff). A proposal to boycott the REF was considered at a consultation meeting of pre-92 branches in February and rejected in favour of UCU providing guidance to branches as to how to reduce the potential impact on staff and how to achieve transparency and fairness via institutional codes of practice.

The Local Picture

A REF steering group has been established at Lancaster University to oversee REF activities. The institutional aim is reported as trying to be as inclusive as possible although work that is rated as less than 3* or 4* will not attract any funding and therefore staff members whose work is rated as 1* or 2* are unlikely to be submitted—although their research may be mentioned in the narrative portions of a Unit of Assessment's submission. The Institutional Code of Practice to ensure the fair and transparent selection of staff (which also includes grounds for appeal) was approved at Senate in November 2011 and this is what the University REF Steering Group is being guided by. This group comprises the Associate Deans for Research of each faculty and the Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research.

Banding Difficulties and Journal Impact

Recognising the difference between 3* and 2* research will be challenging as 2* work is described as being "internationally recognised" whereas 3* work is "internationally excellent". Lancaster University's internal assessment process will be responsible for making the fine discriminations between 2* and 3* work, and there was some concern from members who attended the meeting about the validity of the internal assessors' judgments, particularly because of the difficulty in assembling internal groups of assessors with expertise in every relevant sub-discipline. Between now and Easter 2013 the university needs to do the detailed work in order to be able to make these decisions.

The view of the REF Steering Group is that the initial judgement as to an individual's research should be as thoughtful and rigorous as possible in order for the university to get to a point where it can submit an institutional return for the REF. If that initial judgement is flawed (for example, by favouring particular publishing houses, a false measure of the quality of the research, which is not permitted within the HEFCE guidelines for submission) – then it is all flawed. However, how this judgement is being made in practice is, at present, disconcerting as reports suggest that there appears to be no uniformity of approach or procedure (even for departments within the same faculty), a lack of oversight over assessment mechanisms, and inconsistent or scanty feedback being provided to individuals.

The danger is that, in the absence of authoritative, consistent, and well-informed guidance from the REF Steering Group, heads of department and others will develop their own "rules of thumb" which they

extrapolate from what they do know but which do not reflect the University's agreed approach nor the standards established nationally. For example, one member who attended the meeting said that her department was applying a crude scoring system such that no one whose aggregate score for their four items came to less than 12 (a figure derived by multiplying four submissions by 3*) would be submitted. This might seem a reasonable enough extrapolation from the incentive to submit work rated at 3* or above but it was explicitly and forcefully repudiated by Professor Introna of the REF Steering Group, who said it did not reflect a University-level decision. This exchange highlights the need for greater coordination and control at the institutional level because a belief held by one HoD could easily be shared by others and could become self-validating once it seems to be accepted by those who believe they are "in the know". A decision based on a sincerely held but false belief may then affect whether or not an individual staff member is submitted to the REF.

Complex Circumstances

The Equality Challenge Unit, which advises the national REF team, has a Web site that provides examples of complex circumstances and how institutions might handle these: <http://www.ecu.ac.uk/our-projects/REF/> There is an opportunity for staff at Lancaster to declare relevant circumstances which permit a proportionate reduction in the number of items they are required to have in their individual submission. Information gathered will be submitted by the university to the Equality Change Unit who will make recommendations as to how the university should handle such instances.

Consequences of Non Inclusion

Staff may be concerned that there will be consequences if they are not included in the REF but the reported view of the REF Steering Group is that no punitive or otherwise negative consequences are being considered as the framework has been placed on institutions by HEFCE for funding reasons – which is not to be confused with being an indication of the institutional view of an individual's worth to that institution.

Some individuals may be excluded because there is no Unit of Assessment for which they are seen to be suitable (although a place somewhere will probably be found for anyone regarded as a research luminary). It is hard to see, however, how exclusion from the REF could be regarded as a plus in anyone's future bid for promotion, so to some degree there are bound to be consequences, whether overt, immediate, or otherwise, following a decision to include or exclude someone. This makes it all the more important that the processes leading up to selection decisions are correct. Even if the processes are fair and transparent, the University (unlike in the previous RAE) is not aiming to make a submission of as many staff as possible. There will be a smaller proportion of staff submitted as a matter of policy—possibly 60 percent. It is hard to conceive that negative sanctions will apply to all the remaining 40 percent but there is a twin danger of a slow-down in career progression for many of that remainder, and the possibility of singling out a smaller minority who run afoul of their managers for reasons unrelated to the REF.

Whilst there is no intention for there to be detrimental consequences as a result of REF 2014, discussions with management have been initiated by UCU to ensure that this implicit understanding of those actively engaged on relevant committees at the top level, is made explicit for all concerned.

Professional Researchers' Network

Following the success of the recent UCU Half-Day Workshop for Researchers at Lancaster, a professional researchers' network has been set up. The networking group (open to UCU and non-UCU researchers) aims to:

- provide a forum for the discussion of matters of interest or concern to contract researchers and create momentum for positive improvements to be made at Lancaster
- enable researchers to network informally and support each other

For details and dates of forthcoming activities, please contact the UCU Branch Administrator (LBanton@ucu.org.uk) or see the local UCU website.

Leaving DO's...and DON'Ts

Speeches, handshakes, cakes and cards or a few close colleagues sharing a drink and reminiscing about old times and pastures new? Well we're sure you will have earned a decent send-off after the hard work, loyalty and service you've put in and someone somewhere will have thought about saying thanks and farewell. Or perhaps not.

"I was just glad to get out of here in the end. Friends and colleagues that I'd worked with for years never bothered to ask when my last day was – many just avoided me and I think they didn't know what to say or do. A leaving card would have been nice. I felt like I was leaving under a cloud of shame, robbed of any happy memories I might have had of working here."

Redundancy is becoming all too common in our working lives and yet when was the last leaving do you went to for someone who had been made redundant? Sure, it was a business decision to restructure or stop that area of activity – one that you might, or might not have agreed with – but that doesn't mean that the person, or affected group of individuals, are worth any less for their service and contribution than the person who is retiring, or moving to a new job and this should be marked with a farewell gesture from colleagues.

Upsetting as redundancy can be to the individual concerned, many colleagues compound this by either pretending that their colleague isn't being made redundant or by trying to avoid their soon-to-be

redundant colleague completely. Yes, redundancy is a social taboo. We don't know how to respond and we certainly don't appear to know how to say farewell.

If you know a colleague who is being made redundant - take some positive action!

DO!

- find out when their last day at work is and what sort of farewell they would like
- share this information with other colleagues and sort out something between you that you think or know that the person who is leaving would appreciate
- make the effort to pop in and see them, or drop them an email or a card, to say thanks and wish them well – if it's a close colleague, arrange to keep in touch (and mean it)

"A colleague with the soul to care went to the effort of getting all my colleagues together and arranging a card and a gift token - all in total secrecy - they sprung it on me on my penultimate day. That was the single redeeming and healing thing in the whole messy process."

DON'T!

- pretend it's not happening
- promise to organise a leaving do then later get the person who is leaving, or people (in the case of a section or department being closed down) to organise it because you are 'very busy'
- exclude them from social activities or meetings
- act like a vulture while they are clearing their desk or office, in the hope of acquiring their redundant possessions. They will probably offer them anyway and the act of giving is so much nicer than fending off the people who want your journals, your stocks of stationery, your swivel chair or your bookcases
- say 'I bet you're actually glad to be out of the place' – even if redundancy may turn out to be a lucky escape
- make them feel isolated, unsupported and undervalued

"I do think that it helped that people knew I had a new job to go to, before that, there had been various awkward conversations with people who didn't know what to say, but when they knew I had another job, the mood definitely changed."

"I find it hard - even now - not to get very angry when I look back on my experience. I also find it difficult to separate out things that management / the 'system' got so badly wrong, from things that local colleagues got wrong."

