The future Academic Structure and Academic Organisation of the University

Response of the School of Archaeology and Ancient History

The School discussed the potential opportunities and risks of academic restructuring at its Away Day in January and has since met twice (on 26 April and 9 May) to formulate its collective response to the Project Board’s proposals. As an existing School, which gains a significant part of its distinctive appeal and academic strength from successfully bringing together two separate disciplines and which wishes to sustain and develop that relationship in the future, we recognise that our perspective on the published proposals may be at variance with some other departments.

The School welcomes the principles of reorganising the academic structure in order to enhance further the University’s core activities of teaching and research. We are however concerned that the structure that has been proposed may adversely affect the university’s fundamental objectives of increasing national and international student recruitment and growing its research activities. The process as currently presented could well compromise the very subject identities and combinations which have served Leicester well in the past by eliminating departments, without in fact succeeding in its primary objectives of reducing administrative complexity and improving the decision-making process. In particular, we noted that the University’s steady climb into the top twenty UK universities in recent years has been achieved whilst maintaining a department-based model and often at the expense of the very universities which have adopted academic structures such as that which is now being proposed. In so far as it possible for us to learn from the experience of other university reorganisations affecting our own disciplines, the more subject-based structures have been weakened, the less successful the imposition of larger schools and/or colleges has been (compare for instance, the relative success at Nottingham with the unhappy experience of Southampton).

We were therefore concerned at the lack in the Board’s proposals either of any evidence base relating to the performance of the current structure and the benefits of the proposed structure, or any substantive analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the outcomes of similar wholesale reorganisations at other universities (which in several cases have in fact later been retrenched). At the same time, the lack of critical detail in the consultation paper with respect to how the new Schools will work in practice makes it very difficult to assess either the extent to which the change will facilitate new developments across the campus – on which the paper rightly puts emphasis – or how great is the risk to existing core activities where the university is currently highly successful. The potential effects on individual staff prospects and how research and teaching is delivered in the future are equally unclear. Of particular concern to all academic units are the budgetary and related operational implications of the new scheme and again to evaluate the proposals fully more detail on these issues is required.

Without this information, it is difficult to respond to the consultation paper in any detail. The one point on which we are certain, from our point of view at the coal face, is that the changes will not bring about the academically-driven ‘de-layering’ desired, but instead reposition much of the existing (mainly) two-tier-structure elsewhere and potentially even proliferate it. The proposed School A1/B1 merging the existing Arts schools and departments is far too diverse and unwieldy to function effectively without further layers of subject and inter-subject committees, to enable informed local decision making with regard to the delivery and future development of teaching and research. In this regard we note that the proposed arrangements for the Arts differ from those of other disciplines, and we believe that it is simply unrealistic to put so many diverse subject groupings into a School and to have a hope of achieving de-layering. We know this from our experience as a School and from our engagement with other universities, e.g. as external examiners. At the same time, we suspect that the new arrangements will jeopardise a significant element of the support currently provided by our clerical and technical colleagues, which is far more effective in protecting academic staff time by being locally informed. With regard to the size and organisational complexity of the proposed new School, we would also note that the figures that the Board considered are in some ways misleading; when distance learning students are taken into account, the
actual student headcount for School A1/B1 is much greater than paper figure of 2271 FTEs (which already make it the second largest of the new schools). Similarly, to the academic staff to be managed must be added well in excess of 50 staff of University of Leicester Archaeological services.

Having discussed the proposals at length, the School sees no reason to retract the conclusions it reached at its Away Day in January. These were that genuine de-layering could most successfully be achieved at Leicester:

- by dismantling the majority of committees and functions associated with the present Faculties (we would argue that they or a similar higher level body might still be valuable for confirming examination results and determining appeals)
- coupled to the academically-driven reorganisation of the present 33 departments into a smaller number of units comprising coherent groupings of cognate subjects (or occasionally single subjects where appropriate), sufficiently large in student FTEs and income stream to provide a secure basis for long-term strategic planning and development, but still small enough to preclude the need for an additional tier of subject based committees to oversee and plan teaching and research locally.

For instance, we note that the units currently assigned to School A1/B1 could potentially be sub-divided into three broadly cognate groupings, each with an FTE count of 650 and an income in excess of £4,000k. These seem to us to meet the critical mass criteria sought by the Project Board. That said and done, we note that the present School of Archaeology and Ancient History is already one of the larger groupings including these subjects in the UK and have little doubt that its currently very successful branding could be seriously adversely affected by its becoming obscured through relocation within any larger grouping lacking intellectual coherence.

In conclusion, whilst reiterating its support for some change to meet changing circumstances and ever growing demands on staff time, the School wishes to express its view that for reorganisation to be successful, not only is more detailed cost-benefit analysis of a range of options required, but all staff need to be engaged in the process of formulating a new structure. We regret that the consultation paper does not solicit departmental views as to alternative academic structures that might better take forward the University’s mission in the future. Indeed, we felt it might have assisted the Project Board if it had solicited ideas and proposals from the University at large in advance of its own deliberations. Above all, however, we feel it is essential that the timetable is revised to allow more time for effective discussion and consultation, and detailed analysis of the advantages and potential risks in any new structure adopted.

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