The Future Academic Structure and Academic Organisation of the University

Response from the Department of English

With our success in last year’s National Student Survey (in which we were the top English department), our highest-ever rating in a national newspaper league table (6th in The Guardian 1.5.2007), buoyant applications for 2007-8, our expanded level of staffing (25, including seven chairs and eight new appointments in the past three years) and an RAE return that seems to be regarded as a model for the university, the Department of English needs convincing that the proposed change will do anything to enhance what we regard as our currently strong position.

Consultation Question 1: What is your view of the importance of the four principles…for any future academic re-organisation?

In themselves the principles seem plausible, but it is their implementation that gives cause for concern.

Consultation Question 2: Do you agree with the analysis of the academic organisation of universities?

The fact that the present structure has been in place for fifty years does not necessarily mean that it needs replacing (it is not a boiler). Indeed the fact that it has lasted so long suggests that it has valuable and enduring strengths. It actually comes closer to matching key principles (academically driven, local decision-making, short lines of communication between heads and colleagues) than the school model would and could deliver on such key objectives as ‘delayering’ (by a reduction in committees).

Consultation Question 3: Do you agree with the specific proposal that the current faculties and departments should be replaced by schools?

We believe that the most important unit with the university is the department. Staff and students (past and present and prospective) all identify with the department. It has a title that accurately reflects what it does. There is a community of interest with shared awareness of aspirations, frustrations and achievements. If collegiality still stands for anything this is where it resides.

Although the paper is very light on detail it is apparent that the school model will to a very large extent abrogate departments’ responsibilities. The ramifications of this are immense, not least for the headship and other key responsibilities. To proclaim that the changes being introduced will reduce administrative loads is of course superficially appealing, but without detailed plans and supporting evidence it remains unconvincing.

As a unit the department is academically driven, decisions can usually be made quickly as all colleagues have direct and easy access to the head of department who has the authority and control of resources (non-pay budget) to give immediate answers,
administrative help is at the level where it is best informed and most effective, and happily the Leicester tradition of direct lines of communication to senior management including the Vice-Chancellor holds good. In other words the department meets the four key principles.

In contrast in the school model academic staff (presumably around one hundred in each school), not to mention students, will have very limited access to the head and little hope of building a personal relationship with him/her; in most cases there will not be any significant level of shared subject knowledge. Under the present system a significant proportion of a head of department’s time is taken up discussing their concerns with colleagues. This is time-consuming, but if this opportunity no longer exists there are bound to be untoward consequences.

As there will be if major responsibilities (admissions, teaching and learning, examinations) are centralised. At departmental level the Examinations Officer is accessible to students, aware of particular circumstances and able to make informed and nuanced decisions. Similarly support staff are ready sources of information on the whole range of the department’s provision and are able to give a personal service.

It is difficult to imagine that any academic staff will want to take on school-wide responsibility for say examinations or teaching. Indeed the prospect of teaching being allocated at school level is very worrying. Furthermore if these tasks are undertaken centrally by either an academic or an administrator seasonal fluctuations, to which the departmental model can adjust, will surely result in serious ‘bottle necks’ with competing departmental demands for school resources. This is what tends to happen at present with faculty computer services. Over and above this the likely tendency will be for the central university administration to run the system to its own priorities and timetable rather than what is happening on the ground.

Other serious concerns about the school model include Equal Opportunities, the process by which new/replacement posts will be determined and mechanisms for promotion. Rather than achieving cohesion rivalry and disunity are liable to ensue; morale and motivation will be jeopardised. The school model may be tidier for the university management, but we very much doubt if academic staff will find it to their advantage.

**Consultation Question 4:** Do you have suggestions to make about the internal organisation of schools?

As the answer to question 3 indicates we are not at all convinced that the school is the best organisational model.

Colleagues who have experience or awareness of the implementation of the school model at other universities have relayed accounts of varying levels of malfunction and dissatisfaction. In so far as it is possible to gain anything from the experience of others it seems that the imposition of schools has been more unsuccessful when the department
structure has been seriously weakened (Southampton, Birmingham, Bristol, De Montfort) than when it has been meaningfully retained (Nottingham, Birkbeck).

**Consultation Question 5:** Do you agree with the argument that the optimum number of schools is nine?

This seems to be driven by the desire to create a tidy administrative and financial structure rather than by any inherently advantageous configuration within the schools.

**Consultation Question 6:** Do you have a preference for option A or B?

The grouping is the same in both.

**Consultation Question 7:** What alternative subject grouping might there be in schools?

We find ourselves in what one colleague has likened to an illogical pot pourri. It is of course essentially the old Arts Faculty. However in contrast to other schools in both options A1/B1 is composed of no less than six existing units, some of them - Historical Studies and Modern Languages - already mergers of several former departments. Other universities have autonomous schools of English. Our subject range and size would certainly make such a designation appropriate possibly with American Studies and Film.

Perhaps this is the place to point out that existing subject departments do by and large correspond with RAE headings and AHRC procedures.

On interdisciplinary work, which we think assumes undue prominence in the discussion paper, we believe that this flourishes best between departments as evidenced by the recent development of joint degrees.

**Consultation Question 8:** What title might each of the proposed schools have?

Pass.

**Consultation Question 9:** Do you have other suggestions about the number of schools and the grouping of subjects?

See above.

**Consultation Question 10:** What might the disciplinary sub-units be called?

We find them all unappealing and cannot see the rationale for dispensing with department.
And finally the situation prompting this discussion is to a considerable extent the product of external forces: ‘Imperatives change’, the increasing ‘demands of external accountabilities’ and so on. Has the time come when individually and collectively the universities should take a stand and resist these relentless impositions?

Professor Richard Foulkes
On behalf of the Department of English.

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