

view from the top charles mcintyre

Variance of vision reflects wider concerns about a university's role

I am one of those colleagues to whom Nick Petford, the pro vice-chancellor for research and enterprise at Bournemouth University, refers, who expressed concern in a staff ballot in March about our ambitious vice chancellor's strategic plan for the university. But I don't recognise myself in his description [RF 23/4/08, p17].

Around half of the university's academic staff belong to the University and College Union, and the UCU ballot revealed that 93.4 per cent of the 71.9 per cent who voted had no confidence in the VC or his strategic plan. This result yields a far more convincing figure, by a factor of about three, than the "around 10 per cent of [all staff]" quoted by the pro vice-chancellor. More damagingly, however, he simplifies our concerns by implying that we are teaching-obsessed academics who fear or are unable to partake in the increased research activity that he and the VC advocate.

So, let's get a few things straight. First, most staff at Bournemouth, if not all, have largely welcomed the drive towards more research over the past few years. Why has it not happened before? It's too easy to blame staff for clinging to an outmoded over-teaching model as though they're suffering from a hangover from their pre-university, further education days of before 1992. The problem has been that previous managements never encouraged a research role for many staff. Since 2005, under new management, this attitude has changed and that, in itself, has been good for many academics. In recent months, however, we've begun to question the central assumptions of the VC's plan and its enactment.

At the heart of our disillusionment is the vision of a 'one-model academic'. This encourages all staff to have a workload that balances challenging expectations of outputs in research and enterprise with teaching and management or other professional commitments. Furthermore, research outputs are favoured over teaching in terms of reward or progression, although teaching responsibilities remain demanding for many.

Multiple 'hirings' and 'firings' (around 100 academics have had voluntary or compulsory redundancy over the past three years) have made it clear that *only* strong research profiles matter.

Opportunities for promotion for those whose main institutional strengths are teaching have disappeared.

Our pro vice-chancellor's main measure of academic success is the quantitative research and enterprise income earned per member of staff. The aim here, as encouraged by management, would seem to be that academic staff should be competitively earning their salaries and position through such activities.

And yet a question remains about where the funding for teaching from government, students and their parents disappears. Does it support a growing, and increasingly well-paid management coterie and their regional and sector-competitive growth plans? The salary of Bournemouth's VC has increased by more than 30 per cent over the past three years to around £175,000, plus bonuses. His managers have benefited, too.

If academic staff derive the impression that none of their salary or promotional prospects come from teaching, how much of their time should they spend on it? A pro-research training programme to re-orient staff, called Releasing Potential, reinforces the idea that an academic's potential is trapped in teaching activities—and even, by extension, in 'pure' research ones—and must be released to earn ambitiously targeted monies for the institution. As a result, academic staff at Bournemouth are at odds with their management.

Academics offer a more balanced and co-operative vision, where research and enterprise sit alongside teaching and other professional duties and where there are qualitative aspects, as well as quantitative ones, about what a university does.

Staff at Bournemouth are not so much fearful of research activity as of the vision of a university that seems to be intent upon the rampant imposition of a wholly market-based model. This model downgrades research to a numbers game, chasing money and a high position in the league table, and relegates teaching to a position of no importance.

This variance of vision of what a university should be is at the heart of the Bournemouth problem and, one suspects, reflects wider concerns across the UK university sector.

More to say? Email comment@ResearchResearch.com

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