

April 2009

This document is aimed at the student body, central and departmental University staff, local and national partners and other stakeholders. It sets out the key lobbying objectives on behalf of the student body in response to the RAE consultation process.

LGoS Consultation

Setting the context

Following the results of the Research Assessment Exercise 2008, the University's Strategic Management Team (SMT) has opened a dialogue on how the institution should respond to the challenge of poor research performance within certain departments and divisions within the University. This debate is taking place within the context of significant institutional change, under the stewardship of Vice Chancellor Professor Sir Howard Newby. Other recent review and reform programmes that have been undertaken at an institutional level include:

- A new 5 year strategic plan;
- Academic departmental reorganisation.

It is important to place this agenda for change firmly within the context of the evolving Higher Education sector. The challenges facing the credibility and performance of the institution are great and in appreciating such challenges, the student body can begin to lobby the University, as a key stakeholder, on the best choices going forward.

Responding to the RAE

At the last meeting of University Senate, the SMT submitted a set of proposals for consultation outlining potential responses for departments and divisions not producing research of 3* or 4* Unit of Assessment research output. Two departments (*Politics & Communications* and *Philosophy*) and one division (*Statistics*) did not produce 3* or 4* research, and as such, have been identified for action. It was agreed that maintaining the current status quo is not desirable. At the next meeting of Senate, recommendations for actions will be tasked, considering feedback from consultations with the range of stakeholders.

LGoS has been tasked with consulting students on these proposals and feeding back to the SMT and University Senate.

At this point, it must be stated that a number of variables limited the extent of the consultation; factors including Easter holiday and third term examinations; and the relatively short timescale from which to analyse options, consider responses and engage widely.

Following the initial proposals submitted to University Senate, it is clear that many students have concerns with the prospect of departmental closures; an option presented as a response to the RAE results. It is clear therefore, that any consultation with the student body is informed, considered and sets out the challenges facing the University in the wider context of the HE sector and the underlying strategic objective of the new 5 year strategic plan- to improve excellence in research.

The student-led campaign 'Save Our Subjects' prompted institution-wide attention to these proposals, in an effort to keep the disciplines of these schools in the curriculum. This also attracted the attention of local councillors and MPs as well as the local community and alumni, sparking a debate around the civic responsibilities of the University and the role that it and these disciplines play in civil society and more specifically in Liverpool.

LGoS' approach

Our discussions on the future of academic provision were not limited to looking at the highlighted schools in isolation, but in terms of institution-wide concerns, opportunities and values which would affect all students, staff and departments.

In approaching the consultation, LGoS has framed discussions around the following three questions:

- What concerns do students have about these proposals?
- How will excellent research be linked to an excellent student experience and what can these changes do to improve the student experience?
- What is the 'civic' contribution of the university? Can we define the University's responsibilities to the community?

The following pages contain summary findings addressed in the consultation and some key lobbying commitments identified by LGoS. Efforts have been made to avoid hypothetical scenarios; however, some concerns directly reference the proposals that were initially submitted to Senate as responses to the RAE results and have therefore been contained.

1. What concerns do students have about the proposals put forward at the last meeting of university Senate?

Any response to the results of the recent Research Assessment Exercise should consider:

Impacts on curriculum

- Whilst research excellence is the key driver for change, concerns have been raised at the prospect of reduced diversity within the curriculum, particularly at undergraduate level. Whilst research excellence is essential for driving excellence in the quality of learning and teaching, modular diversity has been identified as an important aspect of the learning and teaching experience.
- Students value the provision of the disciplines of Politics and Communications, Philosophy and Statistics at the University of Liverpool. These disciplines enrich the curriculum and ethos of the institution and play a key role in many combined honours and interdisciplinary approaches to undergraduates' module choices

Research-led teaching and minimum standards

- Students clearly value being taught cutting edge research. However, there are concerns regarding the emphasis of research at the expense of the learning and teaching provision, particularly at undergraduate level.
- The LGoS Student Written Submission, produced for the 2009 Quality Assurance Agency audit identified key areas from within the learning and teaching experience that require attention and increased efforts from the institution, notably contact time, PDP and the quality of learning resources.
- During the consultation, concerns were echoed around the provision of contact time and the extent to which inadequate contact time impacts on the learning and teaching experience. There was an impression that 'research-led teaching' was simply one way of distancing leading academics from undergraduates, and that any definitions of research-led teaching were either vague, not commonly held across all departments or rarely articulated in a way which linked excellent research to excellent student experience. Indeed, it was viewed by some staff and students alike as a hindrance to learning and teaching and an opportunity not sufficiently developed or embraced by academics across the University.
- When responding to the RAE results, clear commitments to quality teaching and learning must also be considered and commitments to minimum standards across the institution honoured whilst developing a compatible approach to research-led teaching.

Performance and risk management

- Concerns relating to quality assurance and performance reviews have been raised during the consultation process. Students questioned why the results for research within the departments/ divisions in question have not been acted upon sooner. In light of past research performance results, questions were raised on the lack of investment in said areas.

Enhancing student development

- Departments offering extra curricula activities provide students with opportunities that may not be offered at other institutions. In Politics for example, final year students are offered the opportunity to undertake accredited placements in Parliament. Students have identified this as a key factor influencing their decision to study at Liverpool. One option which could be considered to enhance and strengthen the research focus within recovering departments is developing extra curricula activities linked to the research being done in that department, such as taking part in current and ongoing research activities; for example undergraduates in the School of Archaeology, Classics and Egyptology taking an active role in fieldwork with academics, contributing to current research.

Communication

- Concern has been expressed at the manner in which the initial proposals were communicated. There was no initial direct communication to the student body from senior management during this period. This led to the miscommunication of information and the development of inaccurate perceptions.

2. How is research linked to excellent student experience?

- Research excellence has been identified within the Vice Chancellor's five year strategic plan as a strategic priority; necessitated motivation for which was to improve the institutions standing as a leading, research-intensive UK University. Measures that will ensure that research excellence does not compromise standards of the learning and teaching provision are necessary to ensure that a focus on research, and the concept of research-led teaching, results in a rich and engaging institutional approach to learning and teaching, linking research directly to pedagogic methods and enhancing the student experience.
- Students raised concerns at future pressures impacting on other departments, requesting the development of a transparent strategic framework from which to identify disciplines underperforming and securing measures from which to offer the resources to bolster their research.
- The University must develop a culture that fosters research excellence that can be filtered through the learning and teaching channels. Support measures for academics, particularly new academics are crucial to the development of the institution building and retaining staff who are leaders in their fields.
- Students have welcomed the prospects of a review of professional services in the hope that administrative tasks do not impact on academics undertaking research. Students stated that they understood academics have many ties restricting both their research and teaching output/quality and that improved support will strengthen not only the quality of research, but of contact time with senior academics.
- It was recognized that there is need for a joined-up approach to supporting quality contact time with actively researching academics. This involves the role of professional services offering support to both students and academics, and PGR students teaching in the schools; freeing-up time to complete excellent research and to dedicate time and resources to teaching and learning activities.
- A debate on investing *for* excellence, as opposed to *in* excellence, led to calls for investment in underperforming research in the identified disciplines. Freeing up academics' time for research and teaching, as opposed to administration, and investing in the infrastructure are options which should be considered during this process.

3. What is the 'civic contribution' of the University? Can we define the University's responsibility to the city?

- The University has a proud history as a *civic* institution. This notion is one that has not been lost over time. Throughout the ongoing dialogues on improving the University's performance, leading figures within the university's Strategic Management Team have advocated the continued importance of the University as a civic institution;
- The Widening Participation agenda has been a central feature of the University's strategic outlook for some time. Students are proud that their University has invested so significantly, and performed excellently, in WP.
- A key feature of many programmes at the University is outreach work. Students felt that such activity should be supported by the University both financially, by supporting all schools and departments to engage in outreach and volunteering; but also academically, ensuring that such work can be accredited, adding value for both students, the school, the University and the community.
- The civic agenda however, goes beyond WP. Students see the importance of the University on local culture and the local economy. Concerns have been raised by local partners and stakeholders as to the impact of potentially losing the disciplines of Politics & Communications, Philosophy and Statistics on the city. Issues of graduate retention have been raised by students and our partners.
- The increasing fiscal cost of Higher Education is felt by all- government, institutions and increasingly, students themselves. The undertaking of studying from home exhibits a growing trend; one that accommodates for widening access. The potential loss of the subjects in question has concerned local students. Some local students see such a move as detrimental to widening access; particularly for local students capable of studying at the University of Liverpool who may not in the future get the chance, should the disciplines in question be terminated.
- Access to such a wide range of disciplines locally was seen as a key strength within the University's WP activities. The University is valued as an asset to the City and as such, its provision and curricula compliment both the character and history of Liverpool in terms of equality, culture, social justice and political struggle.