

Growth is ok, but ... what about *quality*?



A Coventry UCU Pamphlet
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We need a change of approach at Coventry University

The 2020 Corporate Plan, ambitious when proposed, is looking more and more like a **massive gamble** in the face of overwhelming uncertainty. The Higher Education Bill 2016-17 is moving slowly through parliament, which proposes, alongside the creation of the Teaching Excellence Framework, deregulation concerning the entry of 'alternative providers' into the sector, slouching that one bit further towards the creation of a 'quasi-market' in higher education.

By the euphemism of 'alternative providers' the UK Government mean for-profit, probably teaching-only, shareholder or hedge-fund owned businesses aimed at one thing only: **the extraction of profit**. Although Coventry University has done an admirable job in establishing our 'brand' in advance of such disruption, we now seem to be engaged in a race to the bottom, restructuring what was once a publicly owned polytechnic, then a modern university, into what seems to want to be a multi-national corporation with a 'flexible' workforce obsessed with **growth at all costs**.

We think that instead of pursuing growth at all costs, effectively riding headlong into the storm, we should be concentrating on providing **quality education** within a sustainable growth plan, investing where necessary, and riding out the storm. The new providers that are only concerned with profit will be shown, as they have already in the US, to be offering a 'subprime' investment for students. This will leave those modern universities, like Coventry, to be representatives of added value and quality to the wide range of students from a variety of social backgrounds.

University leadership - problems at the top

Since drastically cutting the block teaching grant in 2010, the UK government has been aggressively marketising our higher education system. In this uncertain environment, we want our University to not just survive, but thrive. After all, the University provides us with our jobs, and as academic and professional staff, we take pride in what we do and our institution. But management **need to start listening** to the voices of dissent warning them of the dangers of growing too fast, of taking too many risks. HEFCE, the current chief regulator of universities and colleges in the UK, has warned of the compounding risks facing universities who are pursuing aggressive growth. HEFCE warn that increasing competition from other countries, as well as a decline in the 18-year-old population in the UK, could significantly undermine the ability for such universities to sustain such growth. This does not even take into account the **uncertainty** of Brexit or the continued inclusion of students in immigration figures and proposals to limit student visas according to the 'quality' of courses and universities.

The 2021 Corporate Plan seeks to increase student numbers across the Group to an eye watering 80,000. According to HESA data, there were 27,600 HE students at Coventry University in 2014/15. The Corporate Plan, therefore, seeks to almost triple student numbers across the group. Coventry is already suffering a **housing crisis**, and the student accommodation being built now to accommodate these students doesn't even scratch the surface. Tensions are rising in the city, with residents having mixed feelings towards the two universities, which they feel to be increasingly taking over.

The biggest risk we face is reputational damage

UCU is concerned that the University Group management is not listening to this argument. Too few voices are being heard by our leadership. Our investigations into the functioning of **governance** at Coventry University have revealed some worrying problems at the top. For example, it appears that the Chair of the Board of Governors, who should be a critical counter-balance to the executive power of the Vice-Chancellor (or 'CEO'), is in fact involved in some of the Coventry University Group's risky and under-scrutinised investments, and has accumulated several conflicts of interests. The Board is also largely made up of (disproportionately white, male) business leaders, hardly representative of the University as a public institution, let alone the wider community.

In our view, this may account for the disastrous decision-making by the Group's leadership around the issue of the treatment of staff and unions at CU Services Ltd, which resulted in Coventry University appearing in *The Guardian* newspaper. The University, including its subsidiaries, is a charity, and it has a responsibility to treat its employees with a certain level of **respect and fairness**. Ultimately each member of the Board of Governors who is also a Trustee bears individual responsibility for the risk of Coventry University's decisions and investments. It shouldn't be left to UCU to ensure effective governance, but the risks that are being taken will affect our members. Our worry is that these risks represent a time-bomb for the University.

Talking shop

Since the deeply painful campaign around CU Services Ltd, we have done our best to try to re-build industrial relations. There have been some positive moves by the University HR department, with two working groups set up on DPR and internationalisation respectively, and a negotiating forum (known as CIG A) on casualisation. But management seem to be at pains to avoid anything being called a **negotiation**, as if reaching agreements with unions was a sign of weakness. But we think working together will make the University stronger, more sustainable, and more likely to be able to ride out the storm of marketisation.

On the **DPR scheme**, we have been told, despite a united union position based on extensive member consultation, that the conversations concerning DPR are consultative only and not tied to any agreements involving joint negotiation, and we have been refused detailed information concerning the results of the most recent DPR. We are apprehensive that at the next DPR meeting, the Vice Chancellor will present his vision for the new system, without taking into account any of our points of principle. If member concerns about transparency and accountability aren't addressed in the new system, we will be left with no choice but to support our members in taking some form of further action.

On **casualisation**, management are beginning to see the need to convert existing hourly-paid lecturers to permanent fractional posts, rather than replacing all, including long-serving staff, with new roles that would be open for people to apply for subject to 'market forces'. Many hourly-paid lecturers do not have PhDs (having not been institutionally supported to undertake them, and rarely being in a material position to do so), and

with new jobs inevitably being academic, and therefore having a research element, these existing lecturers would not stand a chance. At this point, however, management have shown no intention of working towards a jointly agreed policy on conversion to replace what is currently an informal policy applied haphazardly and inconsistently across the University.

During our campaign to reinstate Pre-sessional English teachers onto their original contracts after having been sacked for winning recognition, we also discovered that many **PhD students who teach** had also been sacked and re-employed by thefutureworks, a temping agency wholly-owned by the University. We have been working closely our PhD colleagues, who are working for an appalling rate of £13 an hour, with hours subject to revision, sometimes with only 1 hours' notice and in many cases without ever seeing a copy of their contract. Our position has always been clear: all teachers working within the University should be employed directly by the University, on the same framework as other staff and with comparable terms and conditions.

But even these 'conversations' we are having with management have been undermined by changes to existing policy. The University has recently decided to (1) replace a jointly negotiated peer **observation process** with a management-led one with no consultation; (2) re-write the entire **progression framework**, introducing entirely new job types not in any way linked to the Framework Agreement, with significant grade slippage (i.e. lower grades asked to do work that should be paid at higher grades), again with no consultation. These actions seem to confirm our worry that these 'conversations' with the unions on the part of management are purely symbolic, and are meant to keep us quiet while they go ahead and do whatever they like.

Business as usual

Research has shown that top-down management with no countervailing force to ensure a system of 'checks and balances' encourages **excessive risk taking**. If the bottom falls out of the aggressive growth plan the University has been pursuing, if student numbers fall significantly for example, it will be our members, our colleagues and our community in Coventry that will bear the consequences.

The rise through the league tables, although impressive and worthy of celebration, have been earned through the cashing in of the **good will of staff** who are working far beyond capacity to meet the unrealistic needs of the Corporate Plan. According to the Financial Statements for 2015/16, the Corporate Plan 'Creating Better Futures' requires a total investment until 2021 'of at least £350m, with a surplus every year of 7% of income' – the total net assets of the whole University Group are only £251m.

We are worried that the **financial viability** of this highly ambitious growth plan not only depends on continuing expansion of student numbers, but also of increasingly risky financial investments and the continuing exploitation of colleagues in the educational subsidiaries. Our working conditions are our students' learning conditions, and as the recent (2015) Green Paper on higher education, *Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice* suggests, teaching quality is fundamentally linked to the status and conditions of teaching staff, and to the proportion of teachers on secure contracts. Teaching 'excellence' is a **professional practice**, 'not something achieved easily or without focus, time, challenge and change.'

Coventry UCU - from strength to strength

Ironically, with every action the University leadership seem to take, our union grows stronger. Over the last two years, our membership has steadily increased by 10%, quite an achievement considering a general climate of negativity towards trade unions in both business and the media, and we now have a large committee with one of the few full equalities compliments in the UK. We have constantly sought to **innovate and democratise**, devolving both negotiations and campaigns to semi-autonomous 'working groups' in order to concentrate on key member issues, such as casualisation, DPR and internationalisation. Last year we organised the **Alternative Open Day**, a huge success, supported by students and trade unions across the region, and taken up as a model for engaging the public by other UCU branches (e.g. Leeds).

Arguably our biggest achievement in 2016 was winning **recognition** for Pre-sessional English (PSE) teachers in the 'wholly owned subsidiary' CU Services Ltd. In 2015, UCU were approached by our colleagues, who had been moved from within the University to CU Services Ltd between contracts, to help them gain collective representation. After 2 years of hard campaigning work, we successfully achieved recognition with a staggering 73% turnout and 100% support in a statutory ballot. We were forced to go through the statutory route because the University Group refused (twice) to grant recognition voluntarily, despite showing overwhelming support (both times). This victory, in which colleagues were only fighting for their legal right to collective representation, was tainted by the appalling reaction of the University, who sacked these teachers while on holiday and

forced them to be re-employed on temporary agency 'worker' contracts in another 'wholly owned subsidiary' (thefutureworks is owned by CU Enterprises). UCU were again left with no choice but to launch a national public campaign to return these extremely vulnerable employees back to their previous contracts. Their cause was picked up by Aditya Chakraborty in *The Guardian*, who compared Coventry University to **Sports Direct**, a company who had at the time just been exposed for similar treatment of their warehouse workers. After this barrage of bad press, a walk out by the three unions at the Joint Negotiation Committee, the threat of a public protest at an upcoming Open Day, the University conceded and offered these teachers their original contracts back.

There are alternatives

There are other ways of managing change. There are other models for a modern University. Business does not have to be the bottom line, in fact it shouldn't be. It is time to think differently and to listen to the people affected by these decisions. **Unions aren't the enemy**, they are the voice of the people who work so hard to deliver the corporate plan. These people are saying enough is enough. We need to be supported in doing what we are good at, which is helping students from a variety of backgrounds get a good degree and have an exciting future. Our primary purpose is education, we are a public charity, we need to start acting like one.

Please **join UCU** if you haven't already. You pay according to what you earn, and it can cost as little as £1.01. The more members we have, the more powerful our voice will become: <https://www.ucu.org.uk/join>

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