

Council's responsibility for the good running of Sussex requires its understanding of the University's greatest risk: loss of academic integrity

- by a Sussex academic

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The front pages of Council papers consist of a series of tidy black boxes: - title, author, an executive summary and importance, some background, a directive for Council action, and a note about the **risks** if Council should fail to comply as directed. These **Risks** might run something like: Failure to adopt the recommendation will result in financial ... inability ... and closure Indeed, a shuffle through these papers (SussexDirect>Searches>Council>Meetings) throw up many risks, but hardly a mention of how any aspect of financial planning may affect the University's livelihood. In fact, without the University name, a reader might be hard pressed to guess that the corporation's business is indeed teaching and research.

This is about the RISKS, the enormous RISKS, to the University if Council continues to overlook the elementary principles of the academic business and its funding. These include:

1. Teaching students, UG and PG, is now and always will be the major source of funding.
2. It is the quality and character of the faculty and academic support services that draw students.
3. The quality of UG education matters a great deal to students' lives, to the University and to Britain, and has knock-on effects for the University's research capacity. Well-educated undergraduates become sharp-minded postgraduates and the bedrock of research efforts.
4. The quality of students anywhere in the University affects the drawing power of both students and faculty everywhere in the University. Good brings good and poor brings less good.
5. Universities house the nation's resources for exploration. Yet research funding largely follows research already proved successful. Good Universities respect this conflict of interest for exploration of the new, on the one hand, and for well-supported research on the other. This is one of many essences of academic freedom and of University contribution to Britain.

But Council's obediently adopted proposals for financial solution appear to appreciate neither these principles nor the present realities of HE funding in their strategies. Council, without post-September 2008 review and revision, has in its brief deliberations confirmed its support for plans for expensive buildings rather than considering the many costs of faculty loss and indeed whether the strategy they agreed in 2008 now fits the current circumstances of HE funding.

1. **Council has been led to believe that fee-paying international students are a ready source of increased income** beyond the HEFCE restrictions of UK/EU numbers. But China, thought to be a source of these students, is now to teach its students at home and the market is increasingly competitive. And in any case, if the balance of home and overseas students is misjudged it may seriously jeopardise the educational experience for all concerned. Sussex should not risk overdoing it.
2. **An expensive scheme of redundancies is to cash in existing faculty who do enormous service in teaching for new research "stars"**. They (in expensive new research facilities) are to bring in more research income. This too looks like an impoverishing pipedream. Apart from the social irresponsibility which no Universities should teach by example, the possibilities of its success as a financial strategy have dimmed significantly. Research funding, never a big commodity outside of the Russell group, will be substantially less available. So wise Universities will hunker down to their teaching while looking to do less expensive research.

And what are some of the RISKS to Academic Capacity in choosing buildings over brains?

RISK 1. Word travels fast in the academic world and mud sticks. Redundancy in the academic world describes a University that has run amuck. It spells **BLACK LISTING**.

RISK 2. Ratings of teaching in Universities draw students and faculty. The *Guardian's* ratings, widely read by teachers, are probably most valuable to Sussex. But good ratings do reveal good quality of both teaching and student cohorts. Most importantly, these both follow Student:Staff ratio (SSR) and the admissions standards of entering students. These two factors cannot be over-valued in defining the educational experience a good University offers.

RISK 3. The departments targeted with proposed redundancy of posts are highly regarded and fields of central importance in current world affairs. No one should doubt their value to a University in the social and scientific revolutions and upheavals of the 21st century?

History – Remove the underpinnings of contemporary history, and understanding of modern Europe vanishes. Is this history? Floods of letters to the University attest to this foolishness.

Biology - Isn't it obvious that shortly the expanding human populations of the world will need extraordinary understanding of agriculture, diseases and natural resources. (*Guardian* = 7th in UK)

Chemistry - Isn't it also clear that many solutions of the problems created by overpopulation are likely to come from chemistry? (*Guardian* = 1st in UK)

English with modern European Languages. Is not the UK now a part of Europe and its cultures?

Informatics – The burgeoning wealth of information from every field and including especially biology, and many applications including national security, requires phenomenal facility in storage, retrieval and cross-field analysis. This is no time to cut this burgeoning field that affects us all.

RISK 4. Most significant of the **unintended consequences** of the “cashing in faculty” scheme is that these faculty will join hands with the present research “stars” on their way out the door. **Who then will be left standing to do the then low-rated teaching - let alone do some research?**

RISK 5. Publicity: headline news about Sussex will not be good news! The press is bound to take up that once gem of a University that really did make waves in British higher education. **Selling faculty to pay for buildings? Is this what taxpayers expect in their support of HE? How much do students learn from a new building?**

These are the RISKS that Council needs to avoid. These are the risks that truly could bring down the University, but if Council responds to the alert to do its job of safeguarding the institution, it will require a different approach to finding alternative safe solutions to indeed a serious financial problem. Academic faculty could help a lot in defining the basic needs.

And Council will :

Save the GBP 8.6 M that it has agreed could be spent on redundancy and attendant legal costs and to scale back its expansive building programme while, instead, sustaining its productive educational expenditures through this next period of economic transition?

Council might also question the circumstances that allowed it to be uninformed about the enormous risks to the capacity of the University to undertake its academic business