WHO RULES OUR UNIVERSITIES?

Eric Lybeck, University of Exeter

6 April 2018
The pensions dispute has drawn into focus a problem many UK academics have become acutely aware of recently: the rise of unaccountable VCs (vice chancellors); and, beneath them a cadre of senior managers dispensing policy and audits from the top down, while removing accountability and transparency for themselves. Before the dispute, this problem became most apparent with regard to VCs setting their own exorbitant pay. Of course, some local UCU (University and College Union) branches found their good VCs out on the picket line with them; but a larger number struggled to even communicate with their ‘chief executive officers’, let alone sway their opinions and positions vis-a-vis UUK (Universities UK) or USS (the Universities Superannuation Scheme), which are themselves largely unaccountable as other briefs (USSbriefs1 and USSbriefs4) have rightly noted. As we consider our options in the near and farther future, we need to better understand if, when and how we might leverage our power as university members to encourage VCs to represent our views and interests at UUK, ostensibly the ‘voice of universities’; in both the pensions dispute and beyond as we brace ourselves for the interventions of the recently established government Office for Students.

#WeAreTheUniversity became a rallying hashtag on Twitter during the dispute, reminding academics, professional services staff and students on the picket lines that, although we might colloquially refer to senior management as ‘the university’, these management cliques no longer hold our allegiance or trust. In fact, most university charters recognise, as in King’s College London’s, that the university is ‘one body corporate and politic’ consisting of its Council, Fellows, staff and students. In other words, quite literally: We are the University.

Most pre-92 universities are governed, generally, through a Council (or Court), Senate (or Academic Board) and an Executive Group chaired by VCs. Senates preserve the academic quality of education and research, while a university’s Council, or governing body, delegates its authority to manage and administer the university to the VCs executive groups. Traditionally, universities would have been managed FOR its members — that is, on behalf of the academic, student and staff communities and alumni, and even regional constituencies — all of whom would be have been represented on Councils. Instead, in this pensions dispute, we find VCs and UUK actively working against us, as ‘employers’ disciplining and punishing ‘employees’.

But, if universities are corporations of we members, why do we not think of the VCs as working for us? Should we not instruct these executives as to what position ‘the university’ wishes to bring to UUK and USS? Indeed, why has the only mechanism through which we
can reject the widely discredited USS premises been through industrial action? Surely there must be other ways of lobbying these increasingly unaccountable VCs.

**A Tale of Two Universities**

Two recent cases from the dispute will draw the range of possibilities into relief:

- First, the well-reported overturning of Oxford University’s position following a **dramatic meeting of Congregation** on 6 March.

- Second, the still pending request from **Exeter University’s academic Senate** made 14 March advising Council to instruct our Vice Chancellor to work with UCU to revise the problematic assumptions behind the USS crisis.

**Oxford:** As Mike Otsuka, Josephine Cumbo and others discovered in the run-up to the dispute, the **role of Oxbridge colleges** was disproportionate in the USS/UUK consultation leading to the November 2017 evaluation (See [USSbriefs13](#)). In response, Cambridge’s VC called for **more talks** with UCU, while, Oxford’s VC, Louise Richardson held the party line while criticising the ‘tenor’ of the debate. She then arranged subversion of a vote during Congregation (a meeting of Oxford’s governing body) by deploying a technicality through which 20 members (in this case, senior managers with ‘MA status’, meaning Oxford BAs four years after graduating) could stand up and overrule the overwhelming majority of members in attendance. In months prior, Richardson seemed uninterested in becoming more accountable and responsive to staff concerns. Since obtaining office, the VC had pushed to ‘recast’ and ‘simplify’ ‘service delivery’—meaning, modernising and centralising administration — as she announced in her **second oration** as VC at the start of this academic year, stating ‘one of the other rare and admirable attributes of this University is our system of democratic self-governance, but it requires engagement if it is to work, and it hasn’t been working well.’ Yet, there at Congregation were hundreds of engaged members seeking to change the university’s position in the USS dispute. When prevented from voting formally, the cohort arranged an **ad hoc town hall meeting** outside the Sheldonian Theatre in which those in attendance voted 442–2 in favour of changing the institutions’ position. And, while **the media** represented this dramatic staging as the event that awakened Richardson to the university’s ‘depth of feeling’—it was undoubtedly the less reported threat of arranging a vote of no confidence along similar lines—i.e. through Congregation—that seemed to make all the difference for her.

In sum, Oxford’s inefficient ancient structures of self-governance—without even a formal constitution—allowed the corporate membership of the university to change the formal position of its chief executive vis-à-vis UUK. We should all aspire to at least Oxford’s ancient standards and mechanisms of academic self-government.
Exeter: The extent to which aspirant universities clamber to ascend the rankings upon which Oxbridge so comfortably perch is remarkable, while ignoring the governing structures protecting the academic autonomy of members at these collegiate institutions. A recent entrant into the Russell Group, the University of Exeter was historically a ‘green welly’ university: good enough for minor gentry and clever locals, but not necessarily ‘world-leading’ according to the Times Higher or QS billboard charts. However, from the early 2000s the senior management adopted the clear aspiration of becoming a ‘top’ university. This was initiated by the appointment of Sir Steve Smith as VC alongside Russell Seal, former Joint Managing Director of British Petroleum, as Chair of Council. The university’s rise to the stars was to be measured explicitly in terms of global rankings, which were, in turn, translated into 20 Key Performance Indicators (KPI) internally. While the university did briefly enter the coveted ‘Top 100’ in Times Higher Education rankings, this was achieved largely on the back of massive staff dissatisfaction. It was therefore understandable to us academics that the pickets and strike action were particularly strong in this dispute and have remained so. We had simply had enough. Senior management, on the other hand, were alternately silent or disoriented, particularly in response to a student occupation which snowballed from a simple request to speak with the unaccountable VC and ended eleven days later culminating in a final march of hundreds of academics and students through the city led by Billy Bragg and local Labour MP Ben Bradshaw.

From the beginning, our UCU branch and academic community used every means of encouraging our VC to reconsider his position on the USS dispute, beginning with a motion submitted to Council on 22 February, which was tabled, but went unheeded. We then passed a UCU branch motion on 9 March demanding a public statement (which the VC had not provided since the start of industrial action). Within one hour, all staff (except GTAs) received a letter that has since been widely criticised for being evasive, patronising and inconsistent. Still unsatisfied and without any dialogue with management, we coordinated a motion submitted to academic Senate, which used its capacity to advise Council on academic matters affecting teaching and research to instruct the VC to adopt a different position, publicly, to resolve the USS strike as soon as possible. Tellingly, the Statutes and Ordinances had to be dusted off in this meeting, since it had been so long since an actual vote had been taken in Senate. Indeed, in the fetishised pursuit of KPIs and rank measures, all education and research strategy had been deemed to be a matter of ‘business’ and drawn away from Senate’s remit into Council’s business. Committees, Senate, and Council itself had been gradually replaced with courtiers whose worldviews, agendas and interests always corresponded with the benevolent VC’s. Indeed, although the Senate motion was passed 21–13, all ‘ex officio’ members sided with the Chair (VC) against the members elected by the academic community. Council has yet to respond to our advice and the VC has still not spoken with concerned students.

In sum, in universities like Exeter, which is by no means unique in wanting to climb the rankings via shortcuts and flagship capital spending, rather than investing in staff capacity to deliver high quality education and research without having a nervous breakdown, there
remain few, if any, means through which academics can formally register their dissatisfaction, let alone their position in the USS/UUK dispute.

Who Rules Our University?

The issue of how we as academics access and wield our internal governance structures is essential to understand as we enter the next phases of this dispute. As USSbriefs12 notes, the position of VCs within UUK is evolving due to our industrial action even as our leadership at UCU feel we have obtained the best we can get. And, this is unlikely to be the last time we need to fight for our pensions, or salaries or ‘benefits’ such as free nursery care or parking.

Indeed, under the watch of our benevolent, unaccountable VCs, the most intrusive legislation into the Higher Education sector ever was passed through Parliament, establishing an Office for Students which seeks to turn our curricula into a series of Amazon reviews. We need to resist half-baked exercises like the Teaching Excellence Framework in all our places of work, through Senates and Academic Boards which have been decimated, like Exeter’s across the country. And, we need our VCs to represent us properly through UUK, the voice of the university. After all: We Are the University.