

JOINT STAFF COMMITTEE

Oxford Brookes University Branch

25th February 2018

The following is a list of questions and points emailed from UCU members at Brookes which the union would like addressed by the management.

Questions for the management at Brookes

General questions:

1. How has the 5% figure been arrived at?

The impact of under-recruitment in 2017/18, the freeze on the UG fee cap at £9,250 and another drop in applications for 2018/19, suggest that efficiency savings of c5% are needed. This will also ensure that we are still able to invest in areas of strength and/or those with the potential to grow.

2. How long will the cuts be needed – and will there be an annual reduction in spend and at what level?

Difficult to say – we are working hard to reverse the fall in recruitment in 2017-18 and 2018-19. It is hard to predict when applications might recover and we do not know how long the government freeze on the fee cap will continue.

3. Is the university intending to make staff cuts?

We have asked faculties and directorates to model how they might make the savings across all areas of their expenditure. The proposals will be reviewed as part of the planning round. VCG has already instituted a central process to scrutinise all requests to fill new or vacant posts.

4. What criteria are the university using to determine where cuts should be made?

We will assess all proposals for efficiency savings in relation to impact and risk to core functions. Brookes will want to protect areas of strength in terms of recruitment, NSS, REF, TEF, etc. VCG will scrutinise activities which are not central to our institutional priorities. We will expect directorates to look at ways to deliver services more efficiently and cost-effectively. VCG will be guided by faculties and directorates as to where they consider savings can be made without damaging our core purpose.

5. Are these 5% savings going to be imposed in a uniform manner across all aspects of the business? Or, alternatively, will they seek to reduce the potential implications for colleagues' job security by minimising/avoiding savings on staffing costs, whilst making larger savings (eg 10-15%) on aspects of expenditure on physical resources, estates, capital investment and other overheads?

See above. We do not expect that the efficiency savings will be spread equally across all faculties and directorates. We also want to be able to invest in areas of strength or which have the potential for growth. We know we have to continue to invest in the physical estate (teaching, residential, IT) as the current state of our buildings and student accommodation is contributing to the decline in applications.

6. Have the reasons behind the fall in student numbers been established?

There are a number of factors. Nationally there has been a small decline in UG applications, but this has affected some institutions (including Brookes) more than others. Particular factors that have adversely impacted on recruitment to Brookes include: the decline in NSS, the attractiveness of our portfolio, physical estate (both teaching and residential), the change from bursaries to fees for nursing, the need for more proactive marketing both UK and international. Other universities are out-performing Brookes on a number of metrics, and marketing

aggressively. Institutions which traditionally made higher tariff offers are reducing tariff to a level similar to Brookes.

7. How will the effects and impacts of the 5% cut be monitored?
VCG will monitor the impact.

8. Will there be a severance scheme and what will it look like?
It looks likely that we will need to offer VS. We will develop the criteria for this once VCG has reviewed the draft plans and budgets from faculties and directorates.

Specific questions:

9. Will programmes be cut? If so what criteria will be used and when will staff be told?
PDRAG and VCG will continue to review our current portfolio, as part of our normal processes. We will be looking at current and future recruitment prospects, NSS, etc. Some programmes may need to close, others may have the potential for growth, and there may be external demand for new programmes in emerging subjects.

10. Is the university looking at reducing research allowances?
Research allowances will continue to operate as now, i.e. as per the published Workload Planning Framework applied by faculties.

11. Will workloads be increased and tariffs be adjusted to accommodate any of the cuts?
Faculties may need to rebalance workloads and associated WLP allowances in some areas to reflect lower/higher student numbers. Workloads will also need to be applied in order to safeguard positive outcomes for the student experience and research.

12. If savings are being made from staffing costs, will the same 5% savings (or more) be made with regards to the remuneration packages of the University senior management team, as well as the budgets for their personal spending within their roles?
Faculties, directorates and the VCG Office have been asked to model how they propose to achieve the efficiency savings on all areas of expenditure – both staff and non-staff.

We do not intend to reduce the salaries of any members of staff.

No staff at Brookes hold budgets for 'their personal spending'. The budgets for REF/research and TEF/student experience overseen by the PVCs will be considered as part of the planning round. We will wish to ensure that we have budgets to invest in improvements in TEF, NSS and REF to enhance our performance in those areas, e.g. research excellence awards, teaching excellence awards, etc.

13. Does this blanket saving also include the investment in estates and facilities? Would it not be prudent to put a halt on some of the flag-ship projects? After all, we may end up building 'state-of-the-art facilities' and not enough students or staff in them?
VCG will scrutinise the costs of all projects to ensure value for money, and keep the timing of investment under review. However, we know from market research and open days that a key reason why we are losing applicants is because they regard the quality of teaching/teaching space, VLE and residential accommodation at Brookes as inferior to other comparable universities. Also, in order to gain planning permission for any development, the University must comply with the cap on the number of students living in private rented accommodation within the City of Oxford.

14. To what extent do the university leadership team acknowledge that the dip in student recruitment may be due to their own strategic decisions, such as the en masse [O1] closure of combined honours programmes? This has surely deterred certain students who were attracted by the flexibility of such programmes?

There has been no 'en masse' closure of combined honours programmes. However, demand for some of these has declined in recent years. The NSS scores of many of these programmes were disappointing. Student feedback highlights lack of cohort identity and complexity of making choices in UMP as negatives.

15. How much money is expected to be realised by the sale of Wheatley and has this been applied to the funds requiring cuts?
We have independent valuations which are included in our financial forecasts. The actual sum realised will depend on securing a buyer.
16. Will departing staff in ECM, especially mathematics, still be replaced? Will departments with staff regularly over FTE still be able to recruit or will they be expected to remain in this state indefinitely?
This will depend on the demand for mathematics teaching. This is a matter for TDE to determine.
17. What is the estimated cost within the savings period of the transition from PIP to SRS?
The savings are likely to be realised over a longer period.

Observations

1. Part of our present situation is because the university tried to carry on with "business as usual" whilst the Gipsy Lane site was a building site. There was at times quite severe disruption of classes eg noise or timetabling eg students having to move between Willow and Gibbs. I have no statistical evidence, just what people have said to me but potential applicants have said they were put off by this. The building work needed doing but the assumption that this would not require special planning was a detrimental decision. Over the coming years there will be further building work. It would be good to have the reassurance that the university has learned from this mistake and that in future buildings works will budget for the extra costs to avoid inconvenience and disturbance to current students and employ a team of dedicated trouble-shooters.
2. The decision to close many ug Combined Honours programmes is something that can directly be tied to the recruitment issue.
3. Having been told by a senior member of staff that Support Services have taken on around 100 members of staff in the last 2 years. Maintaining academic staffing is critical.
4. The VC stated in his email yesterday that:

" The period ahead remains challenging as we move forward with our plans to further enhance the student experience and continue the refurbishment of our estate. However, I am confident that we will be well-placed to tackle these uncertainties and challenges by building on the talents and dedication our staff. "

What if talent moves and staff gets less dedicated because they are under too much pressure?
5. A simple comparison between the Brookes league table position in 2006 and 2018 reveals a stark contrast. So what has changed would be my question. Management cannot go on blaming the changing HE environment for all Brookes ills. I would suggest they look closer to home. Using the Business School as an example, in 2006 the School produced an annual surplus of about £1m. In 2018 I suspect they make a slight loss.
6. Perhaps it is OBU's desire to invest heavily in its estate & facilitates and thereby asking the academics to do more in less time.

Perhaps it is the lack of investment in marketing while our 'competitors' have spent the last 3-5 years running aggressive marketing campaigns across the Globe. If either of these are the

cause (or perhaps a combination of factors resulted in this fall), is it prudent to put forward a requirement that a blanket 5% saving across all budgets is made?

Our workloads are already substantially heavy, and seem to increase each year. It would be useful to know what specific approaches will be used.

7. How much consideration is being given to the impact on NSS/TEF with these savings? We're getting hammered for this at the moment so 'savings' could make it worse/harder...
8. What would I like to hear from management? I would like to hear them taking responsibility for the decisions which have placed the university in such a vulnerable position:
 - the decision to uphold entry tariffs at all cost, when universities with a better reputation are underbidding Brookes
 - the decision not to offer unconditional offers when many other universities does so the decision to scrap combined honours, thus weakening one of Brookes' unique selling points and undoing a major part of its history
 - the lack of action when the Open Days in the autumn showed a diminished interest in Brookes (official communications called the very quiet days "a great success")
 - the lack of action to address the deplorable performance of the Brookes Union, which is regularly evaluated as being one of the worst in the country (NSS).
 - There are other areas that are damaging
 - And there are of course many other sins of omission! I'm tired of seeing how things are constantly going wrong, not being able to do anything about it when the decisions are taken, and then being forced to come up with emergency responses to increase student satisfaction, recruitment or whatever, as if any of this was the fault of the academic teams or support staff. I would really like to hear somebody say: "We thought this would be a good idea, but it wasn't, apologies, we will listen to you next time." Somebody has to "own" the tricky situation we are in before we can move on, not least to ensure the goodwill of staff for the challenges ahead.

Proposed meeting:

UCU Members would like an open meeting where these questions/points and others can be answered.