

Merger, but on what terms?

UCU members at the Institute have concerns about the proposed merger with UCL: about what was said at the Director's briefing, about the paper that was circulated after the briefing, and about the organisational review which would appear to feed into the merger.

Consultation

It would be very helpful if more information were provided about the consultation process that is envisaged. The messages given at the Director's briefing seemed to be somewhat mixed.

Are staff to be consulted about whether the merger happens, or about how it is to be accomplished?

Our view is that both forms of consultation are vital, and that it is also vital that they are not conflated.

How are staff to be consulted? What seems to be envisaged in the paper (*UCL and the IOE: Closer Institutional Alignment*) is something similar to the consultation about the closer working relationship with UCL. To make this point is itself to suggest that such a model is woefully inadequate for consultation over something that is, quite obviously, of much more consequence: what is being proposed is the formal dissolution of the Institute. Such a proposal demands a programme of thorough, serious, rigorous consultation. We are not reassured by the use of the phrase 'consultation exercise' – a phrase that suggests little more than going through the motions.

The academic case

There may be a strong academic case for merger/takeover. Our position is that this case has not yet been made. The paper circulated after the Director's briefing (UCL and the IOE: Closer Institutional Alignment) relies heavily on the argument that other (comparable?) institutions benefit from being part of larger, more prestigious, multi-faculty universities. The evidence of these benefits seems rather flimsy, while the histories of the institutions presented as comparators are, in each case, somewhat different.

Running through the paper is a series of assumptions: that universities exist in the (global) marketplace, that they are to be judged by a small number of influential ranking systems, and that their future depends on their place within such ranking systems. These are all important assumptions – and all are open to debate and contestation. In the paper, however, they are presented as unchallengeable facts, stable features of the HE landscape from this point on.

An academic vision of how to survive as a small specialist institution, with a worldwide reputation in the field of education research and teaching, has been discounted and as such.

The view expressed by staff at the Director's briefing, that merger with UCL would mean the erosion of the values and ethos of the Institute in UCL, is something that UCU is also deeply concerned about. The proposed merger raises the very real threat in many people's eyes of an 'Education Faculty' without the range and quality

of work and provision that currently constitute the IOE's identity as a specialist institution.

What universities are, whose interests they (should) serve, and how they (should) relate to each other, and to other aspects of public and private/privatised provision, are, in our view, questions that need to be debated: these questions are directly relevant to the case for the merger with/takeover by UCL.

The business case

In relation to the business case, the paper presents a set of assertions and interpretations of some of the available data. There is the assertion that growth is necessary for the survival of the Institute. This assertion needs to be supported with a more fully-developed argument if it is to be credible; in the context of an argument for the dissolution of the Institute as an independent entity, the assertion would itself seem to be internally contradictory.

The financial information presented in Appendix B can be interpreted in different ways. It might be taken to show the effect of the 2008 crash and the onset of the austerity programme, followed by a period of remarkably successful retrenchment. It might also point to the need for some forms of reorganisation and realignment; given that we are currently going through a quite significant internal reorganisation, and that this reorganisation was presented to staff as a response to precisely these external pressures (the pressures of new times, as it were), it would seem premature, to say the least, to assume that the internal reorganisation has not achieved its ends.

It may also be that there is a need to address specific areas of decline, such as the current reduction in recruitment to (some) taught courses. Again, action may be required in these areas – but it is not at all clear how the proposed merger would contribute to such action or would address these issues.

Much is made of the opportunity that, it is suggested, the merger will provide to spend £40M on much needed enhancements. We would welcome more detail on the £40M, since it is far from clear, on the evidence of the paper already circulated, that these funds would be available;

almost equally unclear is what they would be spent on – and more concrete, costed proposals, provided as part of the consultation, would be welcome.

The details of the financial offer, to spend the £19-20 million of reserves raise the question of what is envisaged, ploughing money into the estate are obviously needed, but to what end, as we to see more invested into conferencing or into supporting better facilities for staff and students to work in a manner fit for the 21st century.

The other estimated £20 million are to come from saving generated as a result of merger. Presumably this figure has not been plucked from thin air, where and what are these saving expected to come from, staffing, efficiencies?

The statement on the protection of the employment position for at least one year need clarification and elaboration, and we would welcome exactly what this means.

Until last month, employees transferred to a different employer were entitled to keep the same terms and conditions under legislation commonly known as TUPE (Transfer of Undertakings, Protection of Employment). But changes that came into effect on 31 January mean new employers are now able to renegotiate conditions one year after the transfer of staff. What is the situation regarding costs to UCL central services? How do we know these costs won't go up, leaving departments even more vulnerable?

The offer

We welcome:

- The retention of the name and identity of the Institute of Education within UCL;
- A commitment to the retention of an Education Strategy Board for the IOE.
- Clarification of other investment which may be made in the IOE from UCL central resources over and above the IOE's discretion to use our reserves/surpluses;
- On the assumption that the IOE enters UCL as a faculty, there would be faculty level control of its strategic direction within the overall UCL strategic plan, and day-to-day operational control of academic activities.

There is a reassurance that the IOE will remain in its current buildings, but what guarantees are in place to ensure this? What would be the new faculties legal right of entitlement to occupy the premises??

Professional staff

As we understand it, the collaboration between UCL and IOE failed to provide opportunities for implementing economies of scale in the provision of (some) support services because of the impact of VAT regulations (see appendix A).

One of the motives for merger, then, would seem to be that such services could be provided more efficiently within a single organisation. If this is the argument that is being made, it is an argument that depends on reductions in staffing: without such reductions, it is hard to see how the increase in efficiency is to be produced.

The paper also contains the worrying suggestion that the organisation of professional staff is something that will be determined *after* the merger. It is hard to see how professional staff can engage with the consultation in a meaningful way if their future is only to be determined after the merger has been accomplished.

Employment under UCL conditions

It is telling that as yet there has been no attempt to investigate the variation between the pay, grading and other terms of employment at UCL and IOE. UCU will be carrying out this work over the next few weeks and months, and will be circulating this as a contribution to the consultation.

Timescale

We are puzzled about the timescale that is envisaged. Other than 'these things need to be done at speed', there is little rationale, especially as the IOE is going through yet another re-organisation, Voluntary Severance Scheme and curriculum realignment.

Thus far, only one plausible rationale for so speedy a process has been suggested to us, and it is that the merger needs to be completed if the new, enlarged UCL is to be the beneficiary of the REF exercise. In other words, the REF is to be (part of) the dowry that the Institute will bring to the merger.

Would delay past 2014 mean that UCL could not "claim" the Institute's REF contribution for inclusion as part of its Global Ranking?

The global rankings system has been soundly criticised by academics, and it is significantly dependent on larger political and economic trends that we have no reason to assume as inevitable or desirable. Is this the route we want to go down?

How does this square with the Institute's commitment to diversity and inclusion? Or will the Education Faculty serve as a kind of fig-leaf to enable UCL to comply with requirements for widening participation while preserving its elitist practices in other faculties?

If there are other (better?) reasons for the very short timescale, we would like to hear them.

What is in it for UCL?

The paper presents an IOE perspective on the merger/takeover, only occasionally hinting at the benefits that might accrue to UCL. As part of the consultation on what is being proposed, we would welcome more information on the gains for UCL.

Alignment, merger or takeover?

We're not sure what 'alignment' means in this context, other than functioning as a euphemism for takeover: the latter term seems more apt than merger, given the disparity in size of the two organisations.

For more information, visit our website at www.ucuat.ioe.org

If you have comments or wish to contribute to the next Bulletin, please send them to the UCU Branch Chair at c.owen@ioe.ac.uk.

Organisational Review

Our consultation with UCU members on the impact of the Organisation Review, have returned the following reaction.

We will be taking them up with management at a forthcoming meeting.

Faculty axing

- This was welcomed, but there was concern about faculty staff redundancies

Committee reduction

- Concern about over-pruning, leading to loss of democracy and loss of inter-departmental info-sharing/networking and concern about loss of equalities committee

Pooling research and course administrators

- Principal Investigator and Programme Leader concern about loss of continuity of support from same administrator on a project/ programme
- Principal Investigator and Programmer Leader concern about loss of administrator job satisfaction, commitment and local knowledge if in central pool
- Principal Investigator and Programme Leader concern about poorer relationships with administrators if they are not co-located with project/programme staff

Centralisation of support departments

- Concern about academic departments losing control over their support, and support departments then failing to respond to their local needs
- Concern in academic departments, about who will co-ordinate communication with support departments (eg will each HoAD have a departmental manager?)

Academic departments

- Concern about HoAD role, in relation to skill set required and power it confers over colleagues (eg with respect to “managing underperformance”)
- Concern that academic departments will become unaccountable fiefdoms (ie if they become dysfunctional there is no higher corrective mechanism)
- Concern that financial powers of department are not spelled out
- Hope that new structure will enable senior academics to be more connected to teaching activity
- Concern that departments with higher research income will be able to provide better administrative support for teaching and research, thus exacerbating already inequitable world-loads between staff in different parts of the Institute.

Simplification of systems

- Welcome the attempt to improve systems, as too much academic staff time is wasted by bureaucratic inefficiency.

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Locally we represent all Grade 6 and above members of staff and will be fighting to ensure your conditions of service are secured. And, of course, the more members UCU has, the more effective the support and protection we offer will be.

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