

THE UNIVERSITY OF LANCASTER

Minutes of a meeting of the Council
held on 4 May 2001

PRESENT: Mr J. B. Heron (in the chair), Vice-Chancellor, Professor N. Abercrombie, Mr D. Boyle, Professor R. B. Davies, Mr H. Dawson, Mr A. Dick, Mr D. M. Dunn, Mr P. R. Elliott, Mr R. Emslie Dr P. G. S. Entwistle, Professor K. A. O. Fulton, Mr R. W. Goodall, Mr M. Hart, Professor S. Henig, Mrs C. T. Hensman, Mr G. A. Inkster, Lord Judd, Mr P. M. W. Lewis, Councillor S. A. J. Leyton, Mr H. Owen, Dr C. C. Park, Professor M. I. Reed, Mr K. Royales, Mr T. Spence, Mr A. Whitaker, Ms J. M. Whiteside.

IN ATTENDANCE: Mr C. Adams, Ms F. M. Aiken, Dr A. G. Chetwynd, Professor R. A. Fildes, Mrs M. E. McClintock, Mr J. J. McGovern, Mr E. T. McGregor, Professor R. McKinlay, Mr A. Madeley, Mr H. Morris, Dr A. J. Peyton (for the panel discussion on research).

APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE: Miss H. E. Clish, Mr W. M. Davies, Mr E. Grief, Dr R. B. Henig, Councillor P. Lee, Mr J. Rawlinson, Professor P. Rowe.

CO.2001/25 University Strategy

Documents: VC/01/R152; Lancaster Strategic Plan, 2000-06; FO/00/07

- 25.1 The Pro-Chancellor welcomed members, officers and visitors to the meeting. He explained that the purpose of the meeting was to consider where the university's strategy was leading, why it was shaped as it was and how it could be realised. The academic strategy constituted its core, but must also be affordable. In considering where the sector might be in ten years' time, there could be up to three million students in the system rather than the present number of 1.8 million, of a different kind to present students. If Lancaster were to take a proportionate share of such an addition, that could mean an extra 6000 students. The university needed to be comfortable with its plans or, if it was not, to consider how to become so. Within the time constraints of the

meeting, he wished to invite those present to explore key issues about the core mission of the university.

25.2 *Vice-Chancellor's introduction*

The Vice-Chancellor reminded the Council that it had agreed to review the strategic principles for the core academic business of the university for the next few years. He noted that strategy was in origin a military term; 'the art of moving or disposing forces to impose upon the enemy the place, time and conditions preferred by oneself', and he would like the choice of place, time and conditions. Strategy for the university was not a discrete campaign with a recognisable beginning and end, as managing a university was a continuing, evolutionary set of situations, some of which could be predicted and some not, and with widely varying timescales for different actions.

In asking what was the 'enemy', the Vice-Chancellor wished to identify failure to continue achieving the university's mission, which included a commitment 'to developing and disseminating research and scholarship, internationally recognised as excellent; and to facilitating access to them for individuals and organisations who can benefit from high quality undergraduate and postgraduate degree and professional development programmes'. This statement had guided the Vice-Chancellor over the last six years, and the stated objectives could and should not change. Thus the enemies were those forces and factors that made it difficult or placed in jeopardy the core activities. These factors were set out in the Strategic Plan (pages 3 to 5), and the threats and risks had mostly been identified in advance of that document. What should therefore emerge was some confidence in the chosen priorities and direction of the university, with some sense of how these choices might be fulfilled. The Vice-Chancellor also suggested that members of the university should be more assertive and vocal about the institution's achievements, and some might not be sufficiently aware of how well the core academic business was being conducted. Setting aside the serious impact of under-recruitment in October 2000, the Vice-Chancellor noted that the university was now in a reasonable financial position. There were however times when institutional energy became concentrated on relatively minor internal issues when the big challenges were external: it was the latter that should be the prime concern of the Council.

The Vice-Chancellor indicated that the purposes of the present meeting were to make Council members more aware of trends and of the changes in the everyday working environment in which the university operated, and to expand on the challenges set out in the Strategic Plan (pages 4 and 5). The main focus of the day was not

the financial difficulties, although finances were part of almost every scenario. He had said in 1996 that the university should become finance-led because it was heading towards bankruptcy, and if the university was not financially strong, none of the academic aspirations would be possible. Secondly, the university needed the help of lay members, their political and business interests and their ability to ask probing questions now and in the future.

The Vice-Chancellor noted that all members of senior management had contributed to the outline paper that had been compiled and edited by Professor Abercrombie. What members of the university were seeking was a better understanding of the strengths and weaknesses, the challenges, opportunities and options for moving forward, guided by agreed policies and principles. He and the Pro-Chancellor were not seeking formal resolutions, or more working groups or task forces, but wished to reach a general agreement about the university's 'enemies'. The intention was to continue developing a commitment to the common purpose of sustaining the distinctive success that the university had over the past five years re-attained and, as a consequence, to position the institution to react more quickly, managerially and in governance terms, to the rapidly changing higher education environment.

25.3 In response to questions, the Planning Officer noted that Lancaster had appeared to hit a decline in student numbers later than other institutions in the North West. It seemed that the pool of candidates equipped to enter departments who were operating at the leading edge of research was no longer growing, and the motivation of the relevant age cohort to enter higher education seemed to have reached a watershed.

The following comments were amongst those made:

- (a) that it was difficult for high quality researchers to teach students with increasingly lower qualifications, but no one wished to appear elitist in this respect;
- (b) that more university teaching would in future be remedial, but that there was also an issue about the ability of departments to adapt positively to a new type of student;
- (c) that the university should not concentrate on the small proportion of post-16 students who were in schools but work with the post-16 colleges across Lancashire, such as Runshaw, and be more flexible about acceptance of applicants with different types of qualifications;
- (d) that the university was recruiting from the North West and nationally, and was visiting tertiary education colleges across the country, wherever significant numbers of students taking A levels were to be found;

- (e) that the present time was a period of massive cultural change, of which higher education could play a part in supporting a sustainable and successful economy. Higher education would be increasingly inclusive: Lancaster was positioned to be a major player in the North West and should exploit that advantage;
- (f) that the suggested model of high-rated research staff undertaking remedial work was not right. More creative thinking was required, including work of the kind already undertaken by the Open College of the North West, and with mature students;
- (g) that the problem of talented but unmotivated students should be tackled by addressing their social context, by such moves as influencing decisions made in school at the age of thirteen and by working with the new Connexions service;
- (h) that the largest pool of talented and motivated students continued to be mature students, a category in which Lancaster was expert and should be able to shine;
- (i) that there seemed to be an implicit assumption that UK undergraduate expansion was positive: as the government continued to drive down the unit of resource, however, and undergraduates became net consumers of other income sources, so different student markets should be sought, such as overseas students;
- (j) that the discussion of widening access should not concentrate only on finance but on the wider social implications, including the current waste of talent, support of liberal education, and the need for originality, creativity and scholarship within society;
- (k) that a degree in 2001 was not qualitatively the same as one conferred thirty years earlier, and an Americanisation of UK higher education was taking place, making the sector more comprehensive and more competitive. While Lancaster should not forget its liabilities, such as lack of endowments, recognition should also be given to its natural advantages, including an integrated campus in which residential rooms would all be wired for IT by October 2001, staff/student relationships and types of teaching that other institutions would dream of, and student loyalty to colleges;
- (l) that there was a clear divergence in public perception between research-led and other universities, and Lancaster's penetration in terms of market strength did not equate with the quality of its provision.

25.4 Turning to a consideration of methods of teaching in relation to the student body, members of the Council made the following points:

- (a) that the university might consider moving to two 15-week semesters, or two full-time years of 48 weeks each. The Council was told that Lancaster had seriously considered in the mid-1990s moving to semesters but had decided not to do so: evidence from other institutions suggested that had been a wise choice, involving extra costs. Nevertheless, although the Vice-Chancellor was not supportive of semesterisation at this time, it was an issue that the university could re-examine. It was further noted that while semesters were a good way of handling a lower unit of resource, they would not work until there were significant changes in the school year or Christmas was abolished. The Council was told that schools might move to a six-term year;
- (b) that a more important consideration than the use of accelerated schemes of study was the introduction of more flexible modes of delivery. There was no longer a modal student, and such matters as paid work in term time needed to be allowed for in the teaching provision;
- (c) that the trend for students was towards paid employment, especially where study and paid work could run in parallel. It was important to recognise the simplicity of decisions made by students about their choice of course and their working assumptions about issues such as their potential for indebtedness;
- (d) that there was an important link between teaching and research at Lancaster, since the latter liberated the mind. The interaction of young research staff and research students with undergraduates produced a youthful, vibrant and questioning culture. This prevailed throughout the entire calendar year, especially in the intense research period during the summer months;
- (e) that the whole educational mission of Lancaster should not be distorted in order to fill the last hundred places, and that one aim of the university should be to build the involvement of Cumbrian students to the same level as was already current in the rest of the UK;
- (f) that the relative paucity of research students at Lancaster was attributable to the absence of funding: well-qualified and highly motivated students were ready and waiting to enter if this issue could be addressed;

- (g) that the university awarded as many undergraduate degrees to students in Lancaster's associated institutions as it did to Bailrigg students, and the university had a responsibility to them in its response to the government agenda;
- (h) that the university must shape the agenda for higher education, especially in the North West, or be shaped by it.

25.5 The Council then broke up into three discussion groups, on research, teaching and learning, and the third mission. Reports on these sessions are set out below.

25.6 *Research: Mr S. A. J. Leyton in the chair; Professor M. I. Reed as rapporteur*

The Council was told that the group had asked itself three basic questions. The first was what research meant at Lancaster, why these particular choices had been made, and what contributions to the economy flowed from its research. The group had considered whether the current research was of a sufficient size and scale to stand comparison with other research-led institutions of higher education, how to spot research talent and support it, and how to provide adequate research resources in appropriate areas, especially the arts and humanities.

The second question had been to evaluate whether Lancaster was as good at research as it believed it was, and how it could improve still further. The group had taken the view that the university had performed well in successive research assessment exercises, including the work on the submissions for RAE 2001, and had turned the RAE device to its advantage. There was some concern about the effect of the RAE regime on research, but the group had accepted its relatively high degree of legitimacy, and noted how strongly embedded research was in the university's culture. The group had agreed that there were and should be close synergies between teaching and research, and that it was appropriate to select staff with strong research potential.

Thirdly, the group considered research funding and how the university's research should be managed and organised to optimise income; how scholarship could be sustained while at the same time more focussed research was developed to increase the necessary scale and value. Some very real problems were recognised, since Lancaster had no financial slack and no endowments, and so staff had to be quick on their feet to optimise their position.

Finally, the group had agreed that there was a need to encourage research; and to develop larger research units, but not in a way that stifled creativity and innovation.

25.7 *Teaching and Learning: Lord Judd in the chair, Mr P. M. W. Lewis as rapporteur*

The Council was told that the group had considered on what basis undergraduate programmes were designed, and whether the institution fully understood the student mix. If the institution was to position itself to meet either future demands or need, the issues were raised of whether the design of schemes, their assessment or their structure should be changed, and whether the distinction between part-time and full-time provision should become more blurred. There had been discussion of how new attitudes might be inculcated: for example, whether the question should not be how Blackburn students could be enabled to come to Lancaster, but whether Lancaster staff might not teach at Blackburn. It was felt that Lancaster could stimulate demand by being radical and different.

The group had considered whether research and undergraduate teaching were reconciled at Lancaster: members felt it was, but that there was an issue about how the research should be organised, and how the pace of change could be accommodated, and the current momentum sustained.

The group had then looked at strict financial measures, and asked itself whether, if the university was operating in a target-driven environment, whether the university's mission would be deliverable in its entirety, or whether more prioritisation of activity by resource demand should take place.

Finally, the group felt that it had not bottomed the issues surrounding the theme, including such areas as overseas student needs, and that it had provided more questions than answers.

25.8 *The Third Mission: Mr A. Dick in the chair, Mr R. Emslie as rapporteur*

The group had agreed its discussion should shift away from undergraduate provision and give more consideration to routes towards more flexibility. There was a problem of too many players in the locality, who needed to operate cooperatively for the common good. It was necessary to understand what degree of freedom the university had, and whether it should be making choices in the context of the region or of the academic disciplines it offered. Useful activities might include more work experience opportunities, particularly those that increased the

competitiveness of small-to-medium enterprise, making industrial or commercial experience part of the learning process, developing services to maximise the use and retention of the region's graduates, the development of career-related skills within the curriculum, and possibly developing a regional graduate apprenticeship framework. In the past the university had undersold its achievements; for example, the Management School had led the way in showing how additional revenue could be generated, and so it was important to build on the institution's strengths. There needed to be a step change from the university's apparent sense of historical arrogance.

In considering potential sources of funding, the group had thought about targeting large organisations, such as Microsoft, but also smaller organisations that were regionally based, as well as markets such as overseas students. The University needed to act globally while thinking locally: it was the major academic player in the region, both within the UK and internationally, and also contributed substantially to the local economy. In thinking about where the funds would be obtained, the group recognised that there were already many initiatives in the pipeline, and that some of them had a long gestation period: the question was whether enough of them would come to fruition to meet the university's financial targets.

Finally, there had been a strongly-held view that the university's alumni could do more for the university than at present.

25.9 *Plenary discussion*

In the renewed plenary discussion around all the issues raised so far, the following were amongst the points made.

- (a) The university was a major asset for the region and should therefore force the issue of how it could give maximum benefit to the North West without at the same time diluting its excellence: for example, the balance in the Management School between trading activity and academic work, or in the case of Engineering's close links to industry. The Council was told that the university would play to its strengths and not use inappropriate procedures in its approaches to local industry.
- (b) The region north of the Manchester/Liverpool axis had major needs for industrial and commercial development, and the question was whether its nationally-based activity had potential spin-off for the region. There were also issues about drawing in still further ethnic minorities and rural communities.

- (c) The university was a world-class institution of local significance: it needed to develop innovative work in the region and to exploit the huge opportunities available to it: unless it did so, the Liverpool/Warrington/Manchester complex would be a threat to further development.
- (d) Concern was expressed about whether the university was wrong to pursue many options, rather than being more selective. Instead of using up a lot of resources on different initiatives, the university might eliminate activities that dissipated its effort.
- (e) Questions were asked about whether third mission funding were obtained, it would mostly be related to science and technology, leading to vocational jobs and in essence restyling universities as training schools for jobs. The Council was told that, while this analysis was broadly correct, the majority of staff and students at Lancaster were not in science, and there was an opportunity to develop a parallel culture in order to provide a counter-balance that would be supportive of broader values.
- (f) The Council was told that the economic thrust of the country had to be based on the exploitation of knowledge: while it was difficult to compete with labour costs in this area, there was strength within higher education for involvement in this area. While this prognosis was accepted, it was pointed out that the knowledge-based economy would require appropriate infrastructure and the presence of disciplines that were potentially cognate.
- (g) Within the region, the involvement of the colleges at places like Blackburn and Burnley was important, and through association with them it would be possible to widen higher education within the North West. Furthermore, not only industrial Lancashire was ready for participation, but areas to the north, including Carlisle and beyond.
- (h) In response to questions about whether the university's involvement with a place such as Blackburn College was undertaken for its own sake or simply to generate revenue, the Council was told that reputational issues were also important and that certain funding sources would be closed to the university if it did not have an active regional role. Nevertheless, the multi-faceted work of the university relied on running an institution of workaholics, and that was a moral issue.

- (i) In response to questions about the changing role of Lancaster alumni, the University Secretary confirmed that the development consultants had produced a discussion paper for LUA, suggesting more focus in alumni-related work, and less emphasis on fundraising. Further discussion would take place, prior to a report and recommendations being made to the Council. In the meanwhile the excellent assistance of the alumni worldwide should be accepted and acknowledged.

- (j) In thinking about prioritising activity, the Deputy Vice-Chancellor noted that there was a sense in which the university had no choice but to attempt a very wide range of activities, especially since there were concerns about the medium-term viability of so many of the present arrangements and provision. He wished to suggest a change of basic relationship with the associated colleges, moving away from validation and towards collaboration. He believed that such a move would transform these relationships and create new marketing opportunities.

25.10 Conclusion

The Vice-Chancellor and Pro-Chancellor, in thanking everyone for their participation in the meeting, noted that the underlying purpose of it had been to explain the context in which the university was operating, and the constant changes that took place. The Pro-Chancellor hoped that everyone would have a more complete picture of the university's core academic business and the importance of evaluating its own success.