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MERGER MANIACS

Merger is both murmur and reality across the Higher Education sector these days. The twin terrors of effective cuts in HE funding and the rise in 'competition' for fee-paying students dictate that the HE 'market' is likely to be full to bursting with consolidations and takeovers for the foreseeable future. The result is predictable; job cuts and less diversity in education.

As HEW goes to print (March '02), the University of Manchester and UMIST are to merge - or is that re-merge? Also the University of Bradford is to merge with a local FE college. There has been a lot of talk of merger recently and no doubt even more to come. There was the one between the Ashton and Birmingham that was called off/put on ice; already a few years ago Salford merged with a neighbouring HE college.

All this merger is a direct result of the ongoing policies of successive governments, particularly pushed by New (hard) Labour's obsession with increasing student numbers (up to the magic fifty percent of 18 to 30 year olds) without actually spending anything like the money needed.

Mergers appear to be taking two styles. One, followed by Salford and seemingly, by Bradford, reflects the consolidation of institutions in their local area, seeking to take advantage of the widening participation funding by increasingly recruiting locally – hence the move to incorporate local colleges. Salford in its addition to merging with the local HE College is increasingly trying to tie in local FE colleges as 'Associates'. This is a move hampered by the funding system which won't allow too many guarantees of progression on 'popular courses' thus FE colleges (who have been turned over even more the HEI's and schools and who are in open competition with each other) are reluctant to be seen tying in their students to one institution.

The second style is that envisaged by UMIST and Manchester Victoria. Here, the plan is to consolidate a national and international position with a view to international recruitment and the creaming off of the 'elite' big money students - when top-up fees finally come in.



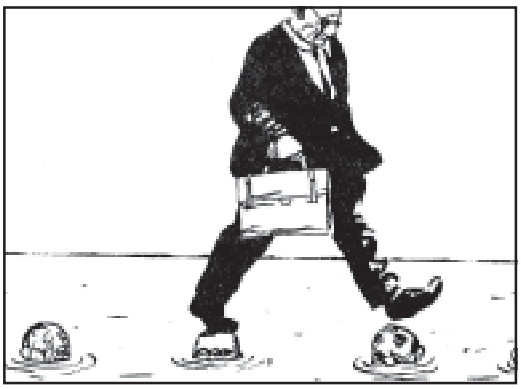
HE: GETTING TOGETHER OR FALLING APART AT THE SEAMS?

Having chatted with colleagues at Salford who have been through a merger, some words of their wisdom seem in order. Firstly, don't believe anything anyone says. Salford was merger by rumour, and these rumours succeeded in pissing off so many staff who subsequently left that the feared-for redundancies didn't happen. Staff should look carefully at their contracts; attempts will be made to down grade staff where possible. Expect some interesting Mickey Mouse posts to be made for 'key staff' who need to be on-side for the process to go through. Also the structure immediately post-merger is more likely to be a compromise between big wigs on either side and will take years to settle out. Salford completely restructured just two years after merger.

HEW (Higher Education Worker) is produced by the Education Workers' Network, part of the Solidarity Federation. To join or for more info: EWN, PO Box 29, SouthWest PDO, Manchester M15 5HW. www.ewn.org.uk

The 'R' word:

Redundancy, rhetoric & reality



In January, academic staff at the University of Central Lancashire in Preston, were balloted by the management-recognized union, NATFHE, for strike or other actions in protest against compulsory redundancies and threats to the agreed teaching hours. The ballot resulted in a mandate to call a strike or invoke other actions, including boycotts and various shades of work-to-rule if management failed to deliver, in writing, reassurance that there will be no attempts to change our contracts without negotiation and consultation.

SEVERAL NEW UNIVERSITIES APPEAR TO BE ACTING TOGETHER ON ISSUES OF REDUNDANCY, WORKING CONDITIONS AND DISCIPLINARY PROCEDURES. ALL THESE AMOUNT TO A CONCERTED EFFORT TO MAXIMIZE THE CONTROL EXERTED OVER STAFF IN THE UNIVERSITIES, AND TO KEEP US 'MANAGED' (SIC)

Although, at the time of EWN going to press, the issue of compulsory redundancies appears to have been 'resolved' on paper, and action is being called on the basis of an attempt by management to up class contact hours, there remains another outstanding issue regarding changes in disciplinary procedures, which affect all staff at the University.

The malaise at the University of Central Lancashire has a long history, but the present situation has arisen from three recent changes, all signalling a new, more aggressive style of management in the institution.

The first of these was the announcement by management of a round of compulsory redundancies without notifying or consulting NATFHE. Senior management admitted that the University was in a pretty healthy state financially, but that some subjects were 'failing', and other, new areas needed to be injected with the cash that would be saved through the redundancies. The methods of announcing this to staff who were at risk were alarming; in one case, staff were casually told in a meeting that they themselves had organised, that compulsory redundancies were going to happen. On this occasion, staff were not given notice of a meeting to discuss their situations, so there was no possibility that a Union rep or Human Resources (Personnel) member could be present to advise them.

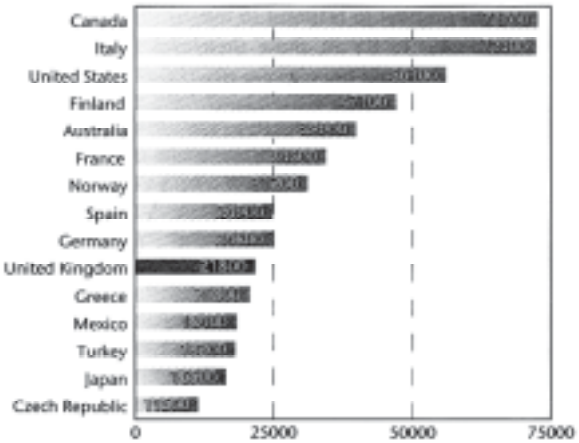
The second change was an attempt to interpret the 18-hour contact time maximum (contact time apparently, according to Regional advisor, including supervision, tutorials, tutor to student contact) as the normal amount of time that a member of staff should spend teaching in the classroom during the working year. One member of staff on a fractional post was being pressed to accept 11 hours teaching time on a 0.5 post, pushing the 'normal' number of hours taught on a full-time post to 22. Anecdotal evidence suggests that this is not the only case where this is happening, and that there is serious exploitation of junior staff, and staff on hourly contracts, who are routinely pressured to take on administrative and pastoral roles in addition to teaching hours. Management have protested that the member of staff in question is a 'special case' as they are teaching 'skills'. This, of course, has not prevented the University selling the course in question as one in Higher Education, nor from funding it through the HE funding body. Given that many of us are now being pressed to incorporate transferable and key skills into our academic teaching, this argument has worrying implications. The claim that 'it is only one', of course, is laughable; as unsatisfactory as Unions are, they are ostensibly there to defend the rights of all their members – and as management know, 'only one' is enough. There is also the insistence that there will only be 'one', too. Given the management's method of sneaking this in quietly, presumably for the sole reason of squeezing as much work out of a part-timer as possible, and establishing a 'custom and practice'.

The third change is the imposition without consultation or notice of a new disciplinary procedure which appears to already have been experienced by at least one staff member. Agreed procedures have been jettisoned in favour of one which devolves responsibility for disciplinary action to workers' immediate line managers. They act as judge and jury, and have the right to enforce penalties and punishments relating to both financial and working conditions without consultation of any other body in the University or out of it. Punishments can include suspension of flexitime, stoppage of increments, etc.

Throughout contact between the management and the union, management staff have whined that the union has acted in 'bad faith' by balloting members for a mandate to strike, have used 'intemperate' language in its addresses to the membership, have attempted to single out union members as 'rabble rousers'and have played for time in order to disenable actions that are likely to bite deepest, such as boycotting of assessment. Nobody witnessing this behaviour can mistake it for anything but the bullying, divide and rule tactics that characterise the actions of those who have been found out, and found wanting.

Further than this, though, it points out the futility of the situation that traditional unions have brought us all to. Any of the above three issues are morally justifiable causes for immediate walkout by workers. However, successive governments and union compliance has ensured that staff are hampered by the legal requirement to given notice of action, and their concomitant time-limits. In the case of the disciplinary procedures now being imposed, it is likely that other unions may become involved as their members are affected by it too. However, the time wasted in consultation and the niceties and uncertainties of joint union action may hamper this. All the more reason for one big education network composed of an equal and fully participating membership, without paid officials, union funds that can

Pay Slide



This international comparison of academic pay in 1998 (£ sterling) uses the OECD Purchasing Price Index, which takes benefits, taxes, exchange rates and living costs into account. It covers all teaching and teaching/research staff in tertiary level institutions, including part-time and fixed term staff.



Throwing a Banner in the Works

Banner is an American product that purports to be for student records. It is commonplace in the US colleges and this was no doubt one of the deciding factors in a number of UK universities investing huge amounts of money to install and run it.

Universities need newer and more powerful IT systems and more sophisticated software to keep up with the ever increasing demands from the 57 varieties of government office and quango that oversee HE, not to mention to cope with the records of students paying fees, getting loans, receiving access funds, various odds and sods bursaries and what have you. Unfortunately for these universities in the tradition of large IT developments (see Air Traffic Control, numerous government departments and NHS Trusts), things are not what they seem. The software, touted as flexible and user-friendly, is... well, not. It is structured around the system used in US colleges and, whilst there are some analogies to UK universities, they are not exactly a close fit. Banner terminology is unreservedly US and although this does not sound a big deal when terms like semesters, programmes, modules etc. are all familiar these days, the problem is that they have precise and different meanings to each of them and any confusion can create havoc. Added to this, end-users are finding negotiating their way around the software hugely confusing and vastly time wasting.

Amongst those Universities who have spent large sums of desperately-needed cash on Banner, EWN has heard rumours that the University of Leeds is preparing to spend between £4 and £5 million on getting it to work. The University of Salford, where the project - having gorged on resources in terms of direct costs and staff time - is already well behind its original schedule and failed to produce the HESA returns anything like on time due to 'problems with Banner', is considering scrapping the whole thing as unworkable and writing off the money already spent. The other solution is to spend as much again on getting it fixed! Similar tales are heard from other places unfortunate enough to 'invest' in this resource-hungry monster. At Central Lancashire, researchers highly-trained in the use of IT ended up going through paper files as the system refused to yield the data they required. Inevitably in today's admin-driven world, faced with this fiasco, the proposed 'solution' is to top-slice HEFCE money for widening participation research in order to pay University staff to carry out tracking through the system.

So now overworked staff are not only put upon by increasingly ridiculous demands for information from the 57 in the sky. They also have to make thre unworkable workable, take the blame when they can't provide the impossible, and live with the consequences when it all gets scarapped. And, somewhow, you can bet there is no big bonus round the corner for management.

be frozen as punishment when legal protocols are not observed, or hierarchies and, naturally, no 'deals' with management. (The lack of cheap insurance deals for its membership would be no great loss, all things considered.) All three issues in fact impact upon all staff and students at the University; redundancies and the loss of subjects affect administrative posts in an immediate sense, and also has a knock-on effect on campus staff. Loss of subjects affects the whole flavour of the University, as few are taught in isolation, and in fact build upon and affect the whole creative fabric of the academic life of an institution. Students may be more directly affected by the disappearance of staff who have advised and supported as well as taught them.

According to the HE grapevine, both inside and outside of the Education Network, several new Universities appear to be moving in the same direction at the same time. In short, they are acting together on issues of redundancy, working conditions and disciplinary procedures. All these amount to a concerted effort to maximize the control exerted over staff in the Universities, and to keep us 'managed' (sic). Watch this space - and let us know about what's happening in yours.

Gagging Orders

The export Control Bill is currently being pushed through Parliament. It is allegedly aimed at controlling the spread of military technology. However, the government hasn't yet decided what hardware, software, disciplines and technologies will be censored.

The Bill will provide for prison sentences of up to 10 years for people who send unauthorised emails on sensitive topics or areas of research, or teach foreign students in these (unnamed) areas without ministerial approval. Peer-reviewed publishing will be under threat. The government will give itself the right to vet and censor academic research. Already, in the USA, the government is withdrawing thousands of technical papers, and has ordered editors to leave out details from papers that would be needed in order for someone to replicate the work.

Apparently, would-be terrorists are smart, but they will not be smart enough to fill the gaps in the papers. Meanwhile, apparently, science and scientists are the ones to blame.

JfTA – Exposing AUT Hypocrisy

The Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) process in universities means that Academics' time is being increasingly switched to research activity. One side-effect of this is the rapid rise in the number of postgraduate teaching assistants. With academic staff doing less teaching, many institutions have consequently witnessed record RAE scores. However, in typical fashion, universities are in no hurry to recognise the contribution of teaching assistants.

Across the higher education sector, teaching assistants are subject to wild variations in pay and conditions. This is also true at the level of individual institutions. At the University of Manchester, for example, pay and conditions are determined solely on which department the teaching assistant is working in.

Fed up with this state of affairs, Justice for Teaching Assistants (JfTA) was set up at Manchester last summer to campaign for a pay increase (the last one was three years ago); the introduction of holiday pay; and improvements such as common contracts and common rates of pay across the whole university. After some initial success in individual departments, a joint university-AUT review body was initiated.

Since then, the university's personnel department has used stalling tactics to stifle any progress the review body might have made on JfTA's demands. The prospect now, with every possibility that there will be no further review body meetings this semester, is that the situation will be exactly the same come the new academic year in September. Obviously, the university hopes the campaign will fizzle out by then, so management and senior academics alike can return to their cosy arrangement of ignoring the lowest of the low.

Recognising this, JfTA has decided that activity is a more likely bet than the AUT to prod the university back to participating in the review body.

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Education Workers' Network - Solidarity Federation - International Workers' Association

Petition Corner

Its going to take a lot more than a petition, but it just might be better than nothing to be going on with. The petition site centralises signature collection to provide consolidated, useful reports for petition authors and targets. Here's two EW readers may be interested in:

Bring Back the Grants for Education in Great Britain: www.thepetitionsite.com/takeaction/699680114
Against bombing Iraq: www.thepetitionsite.com/takeaction/359572792

Good news for Global Anarcho-syndicalism 2002

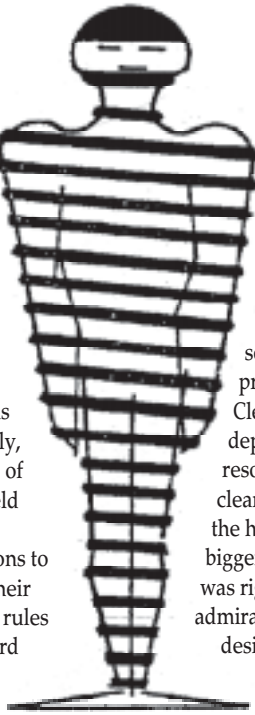
The local Solidarity Federation group in Manchester hosted a plenary of the International Workers' Association, the anarcho-syndicalist international, recently. Present were delegates from FSA (Czech Republic), Direct Action (Slovakia), NSF (Norway), USI (Italy), SF (Britain), FAU (Germany), COB (Brasil), CNT (Spain) and IWA-SP (Portugal). Messages were also received from SO (Chile), CNT (France), Direct (Switzerland) and KRAS (Russia).

Organisations in Greece and the Netherlands are also currently interested in joining the IWA. There was also news of recent growth in FORA (Argentina) and their involvement in the recent protest actions against the Argentine government's economic performance. Among the decisions agreed were: to fund the book publications; to hold a global week of action against temporary work agencies (contact your local SF group or the contact address below for further details); and to set up an online IWA magazine in English and Spanish.

There was also discussion on issues ranging from workplace and union strategies to USI's experiences in Chiapas (where members of USI's health union were involved in setting up a hospital), and the possibility of similar 'international solidarity brigades' in the future.

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RAE Stitch-up



The new universities have made major strides in research over the last decade – and that's 'official'. However, it is also now official exactly how much New Labour is going to award them to continue developing emerging areas of research – nothing.

The 4-yearly Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) completed its cycle in early 2001, but results were delayed while various fiddling went on with the figures. Eventually, the results were announced at the back end of the year, but the crucial information was held back until well into the new year.

Basically, the RAE requires HE institutions to bid for future research money by proving their track record in specified subject areas. The rules over how much different sorts of track record count are complex and opaque but, in essence, key determinants are how many staff are entered into the exercise and how many publications they have produced (of various ' qualities'). The result is that each subject area at each institution is awarded a grade (1 is crap, 5 or 5+ is outstanding, and 3 is split into 3a and 3b, as it was originally designed as the middle area). The grades were announced first, then there was a delay before we found out how much money was going to be made available for each grade.

The latest RAE grades show that the post-'92 university sector has trebled its share of top-rated research since the last RAE in 1996. You might expect this to translate into a trebling of 'market share' of the RAE funding, say from 5% as it was in 1996-2000 to 15% for the next 4 years. This would mean an extra £110 million for the new universities this year.

However, New Labour, now confirmed more than ever as the defenders of privilege, have ensured that the gap between the old and new universities is to be kept as wide open as possible – despite the proof of the new universities' performance. In order to try to defeat mathematical logic, they have decided to juggle around the amount of money which goes with each grade in such a way that '3a' departments will now next basically nothing, while '3b' departments will get zilch.

Of course, the reality is that the RAE was set up by the Tories as a tool to confirm privilege. Thus, its basic premise is flawed. Clearly, if you start from a position where some departments get all the money and have all the resources, then you ask everyone to compete, clearly, the rich will always win. With each cycle, the high grade departments were awarded an even bigger slice of the cake than before – so the RAE was rigged to widen inequality. This, it has done admirably, proving that capitalism works – if what it desired is massive poverty with enclaves of huge wealth.

It seems increasingly likely that New Labour are now squeezing research in order to concentrate on yet another 'target' they have set themselves which looks likely to haunt them; 50% HE participation by 2010. The best-case scenario is that money will be ploughed in to the new universities to create expansion in working class student numbers (middle class recruitment is now flattening out, so the government's only option is the working class, much as they hate us these days). The most likely scenario, however, is the creation of a 2-tier HE sector. One tier will be posh places awash with research money cash, where posh kids go. The other will be the new universities (and any 'ordinary' old universities), where Walmart-type education principles will be practised ('pile 'em high, sell 'em cheap' – and that's just the staff). In which case, the money will by-pass the institutions and will go on grants (or whatever replaces loans) straight to the 'customers'. Now is not the time to stand back and watch this nightmare come true.

Catalyst
Freesheet of the Solidarity Federation - IWA

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