

THE COUNTER CLOSURE

EDITORIAL

Leaving the regional office

At the time of writing – mid November – it is difficult to convey the feelings in the Regional Office. On a daily basis we are faced with the dismantling of our office. Individuals are seen packing up boxes and filling rubbish bags. Some of them are then gone as they either leave or relocate. So the staff numbers gradually dwindle and the number of gaps and absences increase. For those remaining there is a distinct black humour prevailing, particularly at senior management who realise what hasn't been done and what needs to be done. People keep appearing from elsewhere in the University for 'knowledge transfer' – this is where staff who are losing their jobs have to try and pass over many years' experience and knowledge (ranging from 10 to 33 years) in a couple of hours. Staff do this as best they can, but imagine how that must feel – helping someone else who is replacing you to do your job?

Staff Club have worked hard to maintain events and activities to help us get through the remaining weeks following TSA. Some of these are reported below. All of November is given over to 'CakeDown' – instead of counting days we are eating cake through the month until the final day on 28th November. And there will be lunches on Wednesday 26th and Friday 28th – bitter sweet events undoubtedly.

Having said that, some staff are having to come in during the following week for final clear out – it will be a bit like appearing on the Marie Celeste. There are staff who have happily taken early retirement and voluntary severance, and most Staff Tutors have opted for relocation to London. Many of these feel a sense of 'survivor guilt', very well aware that many of their colleagues did not want to have to leave the OU, but are having to find other jobs as they can't afford not to, and face a future they weren't expecting nor would have chosen. Unlike some progressive private sector companies, the OU appears to offer no support after the 24th December, the final date of employment for the majority of staff. Many of us are very concerned about their wellbeing.

And there is an equalities issue as the vast majority of regional staff are women, in grades 4-7: over 80% of the regional staff in fact. So the loss of these jobs impacts disproportionately on female staff.

Feedback on the closure process

There has been a great deal of anger, frustration and upset over the handling of the Closure by the Closure Project Group. The Regional Staff Tutors' Group (ASG) has pulled together feedback which makes rather gloomy reading – but essential for those implementing these changes to face up to what has been a very badly handled process.

Of particular concern was the change from the initial announcement when options of relocation and redeployment were made to all staff to the reality that most staff in the regional office were being pushed towards voluntary severance and early retirement. In Associate Lecturer Services three members of staff wanted to relocate to London but wanted flexible working which the Agile Working Policy seemed to cover. The reality was the OU would rather lose the huge institutional expertise and knowledge than budge from a position of no home working for administrative staff. Aside from the emotional cost to those staff, the decision poses a risk to business – in London there is a significant staff turnover of administrative staff!

There was lots of conflicting advice between HR and the faculties and poor communication; this was compounded by the lack of continuity of staff in HR (itself a revealing issue) and lack of communication when HR 'partners' left. There were many instances of a lack of sensitivity by management generally and the Closure Project Group in particular.

Business Case for Closure

The University finally produced its Business Case for Closure in June – however it is not a case for closure, rather a rationale for a decision already made. There is no properly worked out cost-benefit analysis, rather a limited view based around firstly, a claim that the closing of Region 13 will save cash over the medium term of 5 years, and secondly, that there are no suitable alternative premises available in the South East. No consideration is given to the benefits of maintaining a South East regional presence; assumptions are made about the feasibility of transferring the functions to alternative locations – which in practice has proved to be rather problematic.

Claims are made in the OU's business case about office size, office costs and office refit. The Union College Union's response questioned these. Office rental costs are not expensive in East Grinstead, a smaller space could have been found at around £75k per year for two years. Office refit costs were over-estimated (yet no comment on the cost of internal removal made in July 2013 which now appears to have been 'wasted').

The UCU response challenges the OU's claim that £700,000 savings per year would be made from year 3 onwards. Instead it argues that the cost of closure over a 5 year period will be **at least** £1,326,000 (the Union's calculations err on the cautious side). These costs include voluntary severance for 32 support staff; recruitment of new staff; costs of Penna HR consultancy; cost of London Weighting for 20+ staff relocating to London; their travel costs over 2 years; Camden office reconfiguration; costs of the Closure Project Team and HR staff and the many meetings held over the closure negotiations.

The UCU response also queries the competency of the management of the existing landlord relationship which was good until around 2011 when the OU started making additional demands. The OU waited several months after the landlord had sought planning permission to seek alternative premises and had already spent thousands of pounds on an internal office move and refit in July 2013, without securing a lease agreement of at least 2 years.

The cost of this closure must be enormous: financial costs; emotional costs and organisational costs.

The full UCU report can be found at:
<http://ucu.open.ac.uk/campaigns>

Staff Club Events

R13 staff club have been organising a series of activities and events during what is providing to be a challenging and demoralising period.

Afternoon Tea Jollifications!

There really is something quintessentially English about Afternoon Tea. Last Wednesday afternoon the final group of us neatly arranged ourselves around the coffee tables in the lounge at the Ashdown Park Hotel to enjoy an Afternoon Tea. There were frocks and silver cake stands beautifully arranged with precision cut sandwiches, scones and delicious dainty cakes. Silver tea pots were replenished with copious amounts of tea of every flavour which we drunk accompanied by lots of laughter and chatter. The magic of the Ashdown Forest embraced us all as when tea was over we wandered around the magnificent grounds and stood in awe as a large red hot air balloon took off in the field just beyond the hotel grounds. Perhaps the balloon symbolised what is happening to R13 staff as we all embark on new destinations with memories of many happy times with colleagues to take us on our way.

Guided Walk Round Lewes...

Four of us attended Wendy's guided tour of Lewes on Saturday 13 September. It was a glorious sunny day and perfect for being shown around this very interesting little town.

We started by walking around the ruins of the Priory and Wendy gave us a brief history of how the Abbey had come to be built in Lewes and told us a little about the Founders, Gundred and William. The area has been excavated and is well signed, giving you a real idea of how the Priory would have looked. We were standing admiring a folly which has been built out of the "rubble" that was just left lying around the site when Maureen Stenning, an ex OU colleague, walked by with her husband and grandson so we all stopped and chatted with her for a while too.

A bonus of the day was that The Tour of Britain was going through the town so we stood and watched the bikes go whizzing by us, which was quite exciting, we all waved and clapped the riders, and then moved on with the rest of our tour.

We walked up Keere Hill to the high street with Wendy stopping en route to tell us more facts, while we made our way up to the Castle. We finished the afternoon off in a little tea room with tea and cakes. It was a lovely afternoon, and Wendy was the perfect tour guide.

Halloween Hats and Cake

Friday 31st October and staff continued the regional tradition of using any excuse to eat cake:



followed by CakeDown to the end of November

A long serving Staff Tutor: a personal perspective

On Saturday November 8th, the day of an excellent AL conference in Sussex University, where our Associate Lecturer Services team and Faculty Assistants received a much-deserved standing ovation from tutors, I marked (to the day) my 21 years as Staff Tutor in Arts SE region. I want to add my personal and affectionate thanks to all our colleagues in ALS and Learner Support - you have been infinitely patient with us in the Faculties as well as with our students and tutors!

I am devastated and angry that we could not stop the closure of the regional office although I am one of the 'survivors' who will relocate to London by December 1st. I appreciate that I am one of the lucky ones although I had envisaged a dignified departure from the East Grinstead region once I decided to it was time to retire and I was looking forward to visiting dear friends and colleagues in the office in the years to come.

I cannot believe that the OU management has driven this disastrous decision through in the teeth of a Senate motion and statements of opposition and concern from across the university. The days of our leadership listening to us are well and truly over.

On another personal note, and as I start packing up in the Arts office, a stressful and time consuming task to be done on top of our day to day commitments, I remember arriving in the East Grinstead office in 1993, to the very same space the Arts Faculty team was asked move back down to last summer! We had a library on the same floor in those days with course materials and books of general interest on the shelves too.

How short sighted of the University to have reduced the capacity, role and status of the regions over recent years when their potential as centres for learning and teaching is yet to be realised. And the confidence the senior management seemed to display in our support colleagues' expertise and experience when they located the Arts, CICIP and IET student support teams in the SE turned out to be no guarantee at all of our future as we had thought.

Reducing our floor space in the office, the style of negotiations with a hitherto accommodating landlord, excluding other educational bodies like U3A from our premises and discouraging staff development and tutorials from taking place at St James's House - these were all cause for anxiety during the summer of 2013, but when the UCU AL rep wrote with our concerns to the Director for the South, he was reassured in an email that alternative offices were being found in the area.

That was this time last year ! Promises and pie crusts spring to mind. But just as the closure team has told us they have learnt valuable lessons about the closure process (at our expense!) we too can learn lessons about how to stop any further closures in the future. The campaign for the regions goes on and I for one will be out there for every lobby and raising this issue and the costs (in money and student and AL services) to the university of closing down the SE region in every forum available: watch this space

Dr Paula James, Senior Lecturer, Classical Studies and Staff Tutor Arts SOUTH EAST REGION AND PROUD OF IT!

Campaign to Save The Regions

The announcement of the closure of R13 was accompanied by the announcement of a Locations Review, that is, a review of all Regional Centres. This has meant that the campaign to save R13 has taken place within a concern about the future of all English regions.

The Locations Analysis starts from the position that the operating model is now very different with the advent of Student Support Teams: the decline of face to face tutorials, increasing use of technology for module delivery plus the reduction in the external facing role of the regional offices means that now there is much less need for a regional presence. However the reduction in the external role of regional offices was in large part the result of management decisions to remove Regional Directors! It is not either SSTs or Regional Centres but actually **both**.

And just as the English context is moving to more localism and regionalism – and our online competitors like Coursera are setting up local hubs - the OU considers it an effective strategy to ‘go Global, go online’, in the opposite direction. This threatens our ability to widen participation, meet equality and diversity requirements, provide work-based

learning and generally keep to our mission of social justice.

Removal of regional centres would pose a threat to business by removing capacity and creating imbalance in the infrastructure – both threats to a high quality student experience.

And this Review has revealed a serious lack of understanding of how the work with and for Associate Lecturers – key components of the student experience – are based in and around regional relationships.

There is a lack of transparency and accountability despite claims otherwise. Student Services were told there would be an update at October Senate, and there wasn't. The progress report on the Locations Review website shows there was clearly enough for an update to VCE on the 3rd November, yet SPRC which met the following day received no update at all. Apparently Council will receive something on the 25th November: let's hope they do.

The Locations Review has faced a robust challenge from Faculties and UCU. Rather than Regional Centres having to justify their place within the OU, perhaps those in Senior Management in Milton Keynes should consider justifying their Unit's place?

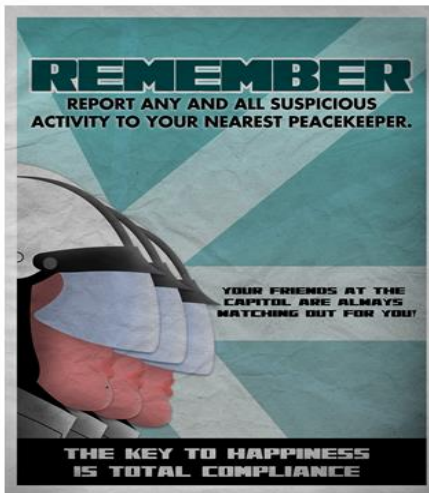
Film Review: The Hunger Games

The third in the series of Hunger Games films is about to be released.

The stage is set in a nation called Panem run by an authoritarian-totalitarian dictatorship led by President Snow. Panem's name is derived from the Latin phrase panem et circenses or 'bread and circuses' describing the technique used by the Capitol to distract the masses who live in the Districts from more important matters.



The Capitol is the central seat of government and the nation was originally divided into thirteen districts outside the Capitol, twelve of which are still recognised as being operational, each responsible for producing, procuring or refining in a certain industry.



All the districts are subject to the unrelenting will of the authoritarian Capitol. Originally there were 13 Districts, but during a period known as the Dark Days District 13 was obliterated by the Capitol and is no longer recognised as being operational.

After the destruction of District 13, a Treaty of Treason was signed to end the conflict, and in the latest film the Capitol is trying to get the districts of Panem on their side. They use the Hunger Games as a warning, pitting District against District in

a game of survival of the fittest.

But District 13 isn't having it. To help send their message of resistance, the citizens of District 13 hack into the Capitol's website and showcase posters of their leaders to show they are still there and inspire the other districts to fight. In stark contrast to the Capitol's messages, the posters are shades of grey with messages saying "We are just like you and we are standing up against the Capitol. If we can do it, you can do it"

Some of the citizens of District 13 go underground and while the surface remains scarred and uninhabitable, hidden away from the glare of the Capitol's, here lies the seeds for a new rebellion, one in which the Districts unite against the oppression of the Capitol.



Released in November across the UK.

Messages of Support

OU Colleagues in Scotland have admired the way in which colleagues in RC13 in East Grinstead have fought to reverse the decision to close the East Grinstead Office. The impact of this is felt most acutely of course in RC13 but colleagues all over the OU have been shocked by the callous way in which management have gone about making and imposing this decision. Not at all in line with the values we profess to celebrate as an Open University.

While sadly the decision to close RC13 remains, nonetheless the fight by colleagues in that Region will be an inspiration to others who may face similar situations in the future. Good luck to all those in East Grinstead affected by this appalling decision.

Thanks for sending round the newsletter. I can't express what I feel about the R13 closure and the way that it's being handled – helplessness and anger are amongst the emotions; despair at the changes in the OU which used to be a pleasant place to work; and so on. But I can empathise with the description of the re-location disruption, although my commute was by choice – I travelled from Cambridge to Camden for several years and the 7am to 8pm day is about right, as is the additional cost. Chin up, folks – you aren't forgotten and you are beloved.

The Geographical Footprint known as R13 – gone but not forgotten



Current relocation until a replacement is found....