



Open University Branch of the UCU
Room 015, Wilson C Block
Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA

Tel: 01908 653069
Email: ucu@open.ac.uk
Web: www.ucu.open.ac.uk

15 November 2016

Dear Mr Gillingwater

It is with regret that I write to you, in your capacity as Chair of the Open University's Council, to express deep concern about the current state of our university.

The part-time UK higher education sector has never been more unstable. It hardly needs saying that the external environment is challenging in the extreme, from new student funding regimes to competition from private institutions. More than ever we need capable and stable leadership, using all of our university's considerable strengths to ensure it remains successful as it moves into its next half-century.

However, at this pivotal time the Vice-Chancellor and his Executive have wasted the university's most valuable asset: by failing to listen to its experienced and knowledgeable staff, the VCE has brought the university to the brink of public failure. It is only due to the dedication and expertise of those staff that the disaster of Group Tuition Policy (GTP) was brought back under control, limiting the damage to our students and the university's reputation.

The failure of the Group Tuition Policy implementation is not an isolated incident. It is a symptom of an executive management style that does not recognise the enduring values of the institution and the extraordinary commitment of its staff.

- Members of VCE have rushed to implement policies without always understanding the nature of the institution they seek to change.
- They have disparaged the diverse opinions of staff and responded as if those opinions, and warnings, signal an inflexible workforce resistant to change, rather than an invaluable source of experience and knowledge.
- They have refused to learn lessons from their own external reviews, including the recent report from KPMG that highlighted poor change management.
- They are in the process of producing an advice service based on call-centre principles, without the necessary balance between speed and quality.

There is now a proposal to reduce the number of internal members on Council, and to reduce the size of Senate. This is a further sign of an Executive that wrongly sees advice and debate as a barrier to good management. The Open University is an educational institution in which knowledge and discussion are to be valued, not denigrated. Following the failures to implement GTP effectively, it is clearly *not* good practice to reduce the amount of internal advice available to the Executive, nor to attack the effectiveness of the University's governance mechanisms. Had VCE heeded the concerns

expressed by Senate, the implementation of GTP would not have failed in spectacular fashion. This follows the misguided and then badly mis-managed project to close the English regional offices. Questions are being asked about whether Council is being provided with the accurate, detailed and thorough information it needs to provide effective oversight, and whether it is being pressured to overrule the academic authority of Senate and the “academic voice” of the university.

As the recognised representative of academic and academic-related staff, the OU branch of UCU urgently requests a meeting with you to discuss how accountability, trust and the Open University’s collaborative culture can be restored. At the time of writing, members of the branch have submitted a “motion of no confidence” in VCE. This is scheduled to be debated at our AGM soon. Regardless of the outcome, this is unprecedented in the history of the university. It is devastating that collegiality has been degraded to this extent, despite our repeated warnings.

We look to you and to Council to recognise the scale of the problem, to undertake a full review of what has gone wrong, and to work with staff to devise effective solutions. A fundamental change in approach is needed if the university is to build on its strengths and secure its future.

Yours faithfully

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Pauline Collins". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'P'.

Pauline Collins

President, Open University Branch of the University and College Union