

The Academy, an alternative to the BIS vision

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In his “Higher Ambitions” document, Lord Mandelson has presented a vision for the future of Higher Education in the UK (<http://www.bis.gov.uk/mandelson-outlines-future-of-higher-education>). There are a number of things in this document with which the UCU is in agreement, the need to expand opportunities for young people, the need to increase research and its quality, the centrality of Education in economic recovery and the necessity for social justice.

However Lord Mandelson and the UCU part company when it comes to the delivery of Higher Education. Tellingly, the document ducks the question of the ‘cap’ on student fees. Reading between the lines, Mandelson is sold on removing the cap but does not want to be seen to be responsible for a politically unpopular decision. So he has set up a ‘committee’ to make the decision for him. Some Vice Chancellors, most prominently the Chair of the Russell Group and Vice Chancellor of Leeds, Michael Arthur, are arguing for selective funding in anticipation of the removal of the cap. The government will then dress the decision up in the mantle of widening participation, with Leeds being presented as a model, using the increased fees income to bring about, in Mandelson’s own words “Wider and fairer access to university”. As Mandelson says “it is right that able students with the talent and ability to attend highly selective university are given a fair chance to do so, regardless of where they live or the school they attend.” Michael Arthur agrees and by going along with this elitist view of education, plays into Mandelson’s hands, since the divide and rule politics of which Mandelson is master has guaranteed that UK business pays less for a world class education system

than any other economy. As a result, the business model of the academy, currently being implemented throughout Higher Education, will gain a new impetus.

For the UCU, this runs counter to the values that inspire the academy, destroying the 'goose that lays the golden egg'. The traditional 'bottom up' approach to university governance is the best way for Higher Education to organise. An obvious unit of organisation is the academic discipline, around which the academic team (Academic, academic related and other staff) needs to be built. Services such as library and IT can be organised in this way, many librarians are subject specialists, IT people may specialize as statisticians etc. There is already a great deal of evidence that the current fashion for 'top down' approaches to Higher Education is corrosive of academic freedom. This is because universities are not businesses, in a formal legal sense they are charities. A business seeks to make a profit from its activity and this necessarily means securing intellectual property. On the contrary, the university is about the free creation and dissemination of knowledge. The creation of knowledge requires openness and debate, not secrecy. Knowledge creation requires collaboration, not the doing down of your competitor. Thus we are in favour of the development of and widening participation in the traditional structures of academic governance, the School academic meeting, democratically elected, accountable faculty boards, senate and council. The top down, market oriented approach to university governance is contrary to the principles of collegiality and academic freedom and will ultimately destroy the academy.

For the UCU an alternative strategy is necessary which promotes job security, the defence of provision for students and the responsibility of Leeds University to the wider local community including its potential to contribute to future recovery from recession. This involves the defence and restoration of the democratic, collegial and liberal educational values which underpinned the expansion of the UK university system in the late 60s and early 70s, which established UK universities as institutions with a

global reach and impact. This underpins the fact that UK universities punch far above their weight, dollar for dollar, on a world scale¹

What is needed is a joint campaign between the Vice Chancellors and the Trade Unions, stressing the importance of Higher Education to the UK economy and to economic recovery. Such a campaign should stress the need to prioritise funding in a recession for Education in general, rather than an argument for selective funding which 'sells the pass'.
