

UCU at University of Hertfordshire

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Transcript prepared by UHUCU of exchange between UH Vice-Chancellor and UH Professor at a School Open Forum held in March 2022

Vice-Chancellor Quintin McKellar: With regard to staff workloads and staff, the amount of work people are being asked to do, again I acknowledge that. I think everyone's done a fantastic job during the course of the Covid period where I think work practices have changed dramatically, both in terms of specific workload but also the way we're having to work and deal with things, so I acknowledge that.

I have to say, though, reflect back to my initial comments. There isn't a great deal more resource available to pay for more staff. I mean, it just isn't there. If you go back to the last time there were significant systemic cuts applied across higher education, it's really the Thatcher years. And over that sort of period of I think it was about ten years from the time she started as the education secretary and then finished as Prime Minister, there was something like change in staff student ratios of from 17 to 1 to 30 to 1 across the sector. At the same time there was an increased deferred capital cost of something like £4 billion.

The university simply had to work, I mean, simply had to deliver less. The quality of education fundamentally reduces when that happens and I think we are as a sector in danger of that, so I'm not disagreeing with what you're saying. I'm saying there's no simple answer to it. It's not as if there's a huge pot of money available for us to go out and purchase more staff. Where we have been able to do it - I mentioned computing science and business - it's because they've been able to bring in the overseas fees that have given us the extra resource which allowed us to release those posts. But there isn't another option, there's no Plan B, there just isn't...

Professor: Sorry, I've got a question that relates to this if you'd like to hear it, because this...this issue of workload is something that the School Executive Group has really struggled with. We've got staff working 120, 130, 140% workload. This is not viable. We've raised it with HR. We've raised it with the then DVC [Deputy Vice-Chancellor] and we thought it would be a red flag. We thought that people would go 'No we can't have this, this will cause stress, this will cause burnout' and, dare I say it, it could cause worse mental health distress that could result in a tragedy and the responsibility will lie with the University for that tragedy. So we thought it would be a red flag but nothing happened when we raised it as a School Executive Group.

...we're expecting staff to work for free, in the evenings, on weekends, and then we're giving them a burnout session for an hour when we are the source of the burnout. It's like an arsonist joining the fire brigade. It's not right, we are causing the problem and then we're seeking to address it with a one hour session on burnout.

So in the context of that, what should I do...? Should I continue asking people to work for free for the University in the context that their real pay has been cut by 20% over the last ten years, as you're well aware as a UUK [Universities UK] vice-president. And you say there's not a big pot of money. I was reading the University accounts for 2021. The University has £127 million in cash in the bank against £60 million of borrowings and a surplus of £10.2 million last year. So you say there's not a pot of money, but I think there is a pot of money, isn't there?

Vice-Chancellor: Well, that pot of money is allocated, as you well know. We're going to spend £90 million on the sites of the new SPECS [School of Physics, Engineering and Computer Science] building.

Professor: But we're going to borrow that money.

Vice-Chancellor: No we're not.

Professor: So why aren't we borrowing money?

Vice-Chancellor: We already have a borrowing of £60 million.

Professor: With a cache of £127 million.

Vice-Chancellor: But we're spending £90 million of that.

Professor: Yes I know, but you're not choosing to spend it on staff, you're choosing to spend it on buildings. Can we get back to the workload? What do I do, do I ask people to carry on working for free for the University on their weekends, risking stress and - let's hope not - but worse mental health consequences?

Vice-Chancellor: Listen, you're a senior manager in this organisation. You have to do your best with the resources available to you, as does everybody.

Professor: But I don't control the resources that are available, you do. I don't control the resources that are available to me, senior management does.

Vice-Chancellor: Well, senior management can only control the resources that are available to it. What's your solution?

Professor: My solution is that you use some of the reserves that have been built up by our work for the last ten years and the cuts to our pay for the last ten years, is that you use some of those resources to support staff numbers rather than just infrastructure.

Vice-Chancellor: We're using a huge amount of the resources to support staff numbers.

Professor: Staff numbers you said had gone up by 200. I just checked the financial report. They went up by 32.

Vice-Chancellor: Over what period?

Professor: 2020 to 2021. They went up by 32 staff numbers and staff salaries didn't go up by the rate of inflation. So all I'm saying is that we won't, we can't expect people to work for free, or do you expect me to ask people to work for free?

Vice-Chancellor: Well, I've told you.

Professor: No, could you answer that question please, Vice-Chancellor: do you expect me to ask people to work for free in their evenings and their weekends?

Vice-Chancellor: I expect you to ask them to do their best for the University. How they choose to do that, I think, is between you and them. I also think it's an entirely inappropriate comment to suggest that we simply spend all the cash that's been raised specifically to replace the building work in the University on individuals. It's just not plausible, it's not possible. We'll have buildings falling about ourselves. If you look at currently the health and

social work building, it's got asbestos panels in the wall. We're going to have to rebuild that once we've done the SPECS building. I mean, you have to continue to do both.

Professor: We'll end up as a university with buildings but no staff or dead staff or stressed staff. I still don't know whether I'm supposed to ask people to work evenings and weekends. I really don't...

Vice-Chancellor: Well, as I say, you know, we all have responsibilities as managers in this institution.

Professor: We have health and safety responsibilities.

Vice-Chancellor: You have to manage the colleagues you have reporting to you. You have to do it in as fair and equitable a way as you possibly can.

Professor: But we have health and safety responsibilities above all. And we cannot cause ill health in our staff under the Health and Safety Act. We cannot do that, that is first and foremost what we cannot do.

Vice-Chancellor: I don't think you're being asked to do that.

Professor: If I have to ask them to work evenings and weekends, that's exactly what I'm asking them to do.

Vice-Chancellor: Well, I think we'll have to disagree.

Professor: On what? You haven't given me an answer.

Vice-Chancellor: I have given you an answer.

Professor: Should I ask them to work evenings and weekends?

Vice-Chancellor: I've told you that you've got to manage your staff appropriately.

Professor: By asking them to work evenings and weekends or not?

Vice-Chancellor: Well, I'm afraid you're asking a question which is entirely inappropriate.

Professor: Oh! Well, there we are. And that's the problem, you think that's an inappropriate question.

Vice-Chancellor: I do.

Professor: Ok.

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