

Developing a vibrant research culture

An alternative plan for the future of the University of Derby's research culture and environment

Background

The University of Derby have proposed to make up to 40 professors and associate professors redundant. While this approach lacks a clear rationale it appears to be seeking three primary outcomes.

- 1) **Reduced cost.** To reduce the overhead costs for the University in a challenging financial period.
- 2) **Increased income.** To reorientate the activities of senior academic staff towards income generation
- 3) **Success in the REF.** To maximise the University's performance in the Research Excellence Framework (REF2029).

This alternative proposal has been developed by the UCU and representatives of the professoriate in consultation with the wider population of associate professors and professors. In it, we argue, that large scale redundancies amongst senior staff is a highly risky strategy for the University and that a better approach can be found which builds on existing structures and expertise to increase income generation and REF performance. We remain committed to the development of research at the University of Derby and believe that the plan included in this document represents the best way forward.

Commentary on the University's proposal

We accept that the University is in a challenging financial position and that there is a need to act promptly to ensure financial sustainability. We do not, however, believe that there is a clear rationale for the decision to focus on associate professors and professors. The Institution's financial position is a much wider issue and primarily linked to rising costs, declining revenues and challenges in achieving the Institution's target student numbers. Most of these issues are policy issues which need to be addressed nationally. A reorganisation of associate professors and professors will not address these bigger issues and may undermine the University in a variety of ways.

We have serious doubts about the redundancy approach as it is articulated. It represents a narrow conception of the academic role and threatens to do considerable damage to the profile, reputation and ranking of the University. In particular, the current proposal threatens to damage the University's performance in REF by disrupting researchers who are working towards this institutional aim.

Professorial and associate professorial work cannot be reduced to either income generation or the achievement of a single metric. The current approach does not recognise the role that professors and associate professors play in areas like institutional governance, the recruitment and teaching of postgraduate students, particularly postgraduate researchers, nor how research and expertise underpin the whole institution's teaching and learning.

The proposed redundancies undermine the idea that it is possible for academic staff to be promoted to associate professor or professor based on professional excellence or excellence in teaching and learning. We view this as a dangerous narrowing of the role of senior academic staff and one which is particularly damaging in an institution where there has been a historic commitment to high quality teaching and professional practice. This commitment has contributed to the achievement of Gold TEF status and we are worried about the way in which the current proposals might endanger that.

Given this we would encourage the University to reflect on the value that staff with a focus on teaching and professional practice, as well as research, bring to the institution and consider how such staff can be used more actively to drive forward the institution's recruitment, teaching culture, and aim to achieve TEF Gold in the next assessment. Furthermore, it is important to restate that academic success should not be judged solely on income generation and to recognise the wider value of the social, civic and indeed academic contribution that associate professors and professors make.

We believe that the University should continue to explore a range of alternative cost saving approaches. These might include **selling or renting out under-utilised buildings**, pausing or slowing further **capital investment**, improving **energy efficiency** and **reducing waste**, streamlining procurement and **reviewing existing suppliers** to reduce costs, exploring **collaboration and cost-sharing initiatives** with other business and institutions, reviewing **senior leader compensation**, continuing with **hiring freezes**, increasing **flexible working and part-time working** opportunities and opening a new **university wide voluntary severance programme**.

Alongside these cost saving ideas we believe that there are a range of new income generating opportunities which could also be created around the development of **short courses, industry partnerships, alumni engagement** and the maximisation of **IP-related income**. We are not in the best position to propose detailed reforms to the way in which the University is run, but the response that we received on publishing the draft of this plan suggest that staff across the University have a wide range of ideas that could be put into practice. We would encourage senior management to reach out more widely to staff to develop new approaches to income generation and increased efficiency.

We would also argue that the University should adopt a more participatory and consultative approach as it evolves its future strategy. People on the frontlines of the University should be empowered, and supported with clear guidance from their line managers, to do their jobs and their expertise should be utilised to support the wider project of the University's strategy development and financial sustainability.

We are enthusiastic about the idea of developing the research culture within the institution, maximising performance in REF and increasing research funding and research-related income generation. In the plan below, we set out ways to achieve this constructively and to the benefit of the University. Our proposal is motivated by concern about the riskiness of the current redundancy plan. A plan that is likely to weaken research rather than strengthen it. While we recognise that it can be tempting to seek to reduce costs during periods of financial crisis, there is a danger that such efforts lead to a downward spiral. This is particularly likely to be the case if the cuts are made amongst some of the institution's most experienced and expert staff. Instead, we argue that the University should focus on strengthening the support for its existing expertise and use this to create a sustainable research culture.

Developing a vibrant research culture and environment

A strong research culture and environment is at the heart of the University of Derby's mission, values and operations. We believe that the current proposal endangers this and that we should instead focus on nurturing and growing this culture and environment. Many plans to develop research in the University have already been put in place and need to be better supported and given the opportunity to come to fruition. This proposal works with the grain of the existing strategy, whilst the redundancy plan threatens to push research in the institution backwards.

While the case for a strong research culture is much wider than the achievement of a performance metric like REF, we do believe that REF provides an appropriate and business-relevant basis on which future strategy should stand. REF includes consideration of the production of high-quality scientific outputs, the development of a research environment (which includes culture, scholarly discussion and debate, doctoral provision and governance as well as income) and impact. The current proposal ignores much of this in favour of a denuded definition of what the output of professorial and associate professorial work should be. We therefore propose an alternative approach.

The University has a wide range of areas of research excellence and expertise. In recent years these have been organised into six research themes as follows:

- Biomedical and clinical science
- Creative and cultural industries

- Data science
- Business, economic and social policy
- Public services
- Zero carbon

These themes are of different sizes and stages of development, but the theme framework offers the University an opportunity for a major step change in the profile and impact of research. So far these research themes have functioned primarily as communities of practice and channels for small amounts of University funding. They need time to establish and move on their proactive plans made in response to the new *Innovation and Research Strategy*, launched in the Autumn of 2024. We suggest that the themes need to become far more concrete to provide the necessary infrastructure for income generation and a clear mapping to REF Units of Assessment (UoAs) needs to be built to ensure that the themes support this.

In practice this means that there will need to be a restructuring of time and resource around the themes. This is likely to include the following.

- The strengthening of the theme lead role with an appropriate allocation of time.
- Further support and development of line management capacity, with more careful discussion of how authority and responsibilities are shared between line-managers, theme leads, UoA leads, centre leaders and other key leaders. At present the situation is often unclear and this leads to confusion and a lack of clarity in objectives.
- Developing the leadership and governance of the themes to ensure that they have both the strategic and operational capability to drive research forwards. This will require careful alignment with the activities of the Colleges and UoAs.
- The development of stronger research centres nested under the themes and aligned to UoAs to provide further focus for research. As with the themes the leadership, governance and resourcing of such centres needs to be strengthened.
- Each theme should develop, if they have not done so, an operational *Income generation group* which can review grant and tender opportunities and organise the theme's response to these. A key task for this group would be the identification of likely funders including both research councils and other grant income as well as other sources of income including government, contract research and knowledge transfer. Such groups should also actively build relationships with partners and collaborators for joint bidding.
- Allocation of dedicated resource (drawn from the professors and associate professor's workloads) to both REF activity and income generation. The assumption should be that all professors and associate professors have clear and dedicated time for both research and income generation. This can be agreed

through the Academic Workload Planning (AWP) process, co-ordinated through the themes and monitored and managed by line managers through the objective setting and appraisal processes and through Individual Research Plans (IRPs).

- Research budgets to be centralised into the themes to allow the leadership of the themes to make strategic decisions about what activities to engage with. There is also a strong case for increasing the budgets available to support business development activities within the themes.
- The re-organisation of URKEO and other central resources around the themes to provide support and strengthen the research infrastructure within the themes. It is important that support levels are ramped up and made more responsive to academics and more outcome focused.
- Themes should be tasked with clear responsibilities around both REF performance (based on a clear description of the scale and quality of the outcome sought) and income generation (based on clear annual and 2028 targets which are related to the resource available within the UoAs). The theme leads should continue to report directly to *Provost – Innovation and Research* and the *Associate Provost for Innovation and Research*, with the development of income generation as a key area of focus for this relationship.

If this approach is taken, then we are confident that we can deliver a level of income generation that exceeds the savings that are anticipated from the redundancy process. The areas in the University where there are clear targets, structures and responsibilities for income generation are where there is most success.

The plan has been designed to work within existing University structures and so could be operationalised rapidly. Once it has been put in place its implementation would become a normal part of University business and could be driven forward through normal DPR processes and associated performance management. We believe that this represents a much stronger and more sustainable approach than the one-off slash and burn approach of large-scale redundancies.

We hope that the University will give this plan serious consideration and look forward to discussing how to take this forward with you. We would be very keen to meet to develop these plans further and undertake more detailed work in the costing of the new approach.