

Theme of pharmacology
Division of Biosciences
Faculty of Life Sciences
UCL (or some variant of that yet to be agreed)

To [REDACTED]
29 May 2007

Dear [REDACTED]

Report on Academic Board meeting on 24 May 2007

I am writing because you asked for a report about what happened at Academic Board.

I can think of no provost who was greeted with more good will than Malcolm Grant. After the turbulent period of the merger fiasco, all that anyone wanted was peace to get on with their job. So it was, for a while. Despite a gradually increasing perception that some of the things that Malcolm wanted sounded alarmingly like the Imperial (or NHS?)-corporate model, they remained faithful, until quite recently, that there was genuine dialogue and desire to reach consensus. Admittedly that feeling has been wearing a bit thin recently, hence my first letter to you.

All that changed one week ago, when an eagle-eyed administrator spotted the following item in one of the 30 documents that constituted the agenda for the Academic Board meeting (in appendix 3/23). There has been only one week to think about it, at the busiest time of the year with most people involved in examining.

5 The Dean is in the process of consulting further within the FLS on the naming of the proposed new academic units. Against this background, AB is invited:

5.1 to recommend to Council for formal approval the implementation with effect from 1 August 2007 of a new structure of divisions within the FLS as outlined in paragraph 4 above

5.2 to authorise the Provost to take action, as Chair on behalf of AB, to recommend to Council for formal approval the names of the new divisions to be established within the FLS, once the Dean has completed consultation within the FLS on these names and on the academic structure within the divisions.

Furthermore in the agenda this was labelled as for formal approval only, i.e. there was to be no discussion, of very major changes.

My understanding, as explained elsewhere in the agenda is

This implementation plan includes the restructuring of the main academic units of FLS in accordance with the process set out in UCL Statute 10(1) - which provides that the academic units of UCL shall be determined by Council on the advice of Academic Board (AB).

I must emphasise that NO plan has been agreed about the abolition of departments and what should replace them. Quite on the contrary, there is blood on the floor in the Faculty of Life Sciences (FLS) about what should be done. Item 5.2 therefore can only be interpreted as an unsubtle attempt to make AB relinquish its statutory duty to consider changes. There can be no scrutiny of the proposals, because there are not yet any proposals to scrutinize.

So what happened at AB? Firstly, after representations were made to Tim Perry, the item above was removed from the 'matters for formal approval', and appeared for discussion. I was rather amazed to hear Malcolm claim that the matter was discussed because he was open and wanted to hear views. In fact it was open for discussion only because the attempt to slip it through without discussion was spotted and stopped.

Malcolm started by giving some history in which changes were justified as following the advice of the external review by Alan North. In my view, this is not accurate. What happened was that North endorsed, without obvious enthusiasm, what *UCL had been put to him* as our "preferred option 1" (though I must emphasise that this option was not preferred by many people). In any case, the really contentious part of the proposals, the abolition of departments and the centralisation of power, was not dealt with at all in the North Report. All the difficult detail was left to us and is still the subject of vigorous argument. It is, therefore, quite wrong to say that we only are implementing changes recommended by North. In only one place did North criticise the options that had been put to him. He said that he thought the research groups in our division were too big (I agree). This single recommendation that deviated from what had been put to him was rejected by Malcolm.

The discussion at AB was quite constructive. Many good points were made. But at the end of the discussion, nothing whatsoever had changed (this is coming to be the standard pattern). In the end, it was left to me to ask whether or not we were deemed to have agreed to items 5.1 and 5.2 above. I had some difficulty getting a straight answer to that question. In the end Tim Perry read out 5.1 (relatively uncontentious), but I had to insist again to get him to read 5.2, Item 5.2 is very contentious (and possibly even unconstitutional –it isn't clear whether AB has the power to relinquish its statutory duty to scrutinize proposed changes to departments). Eventually 5.2 was read out too, quickly and semi-audibly. But Malcolm brushed aside the detail and essentially said "trust me I'm a decent

chap". Eventually he held a show of hands, but the motions were never read out properly -just "those for 5.1" and "those for 5.2". He had really twisted it into "are you with me or against me". It was a performance worthy of a courtroom drama, but it left a lot of people feeling that they had been cheated.

This letter represents, of course, only my opinion. Broadly similar views are held by many of my research-active colleagues, but I cannot give you numbers. I do know that a young colleague, whom I regard as one of the brightest brains in pharmacology, came out of the AB meeting quivering with rage at the way we'd been treated, and wondering whether there was a place for a good research group in Oxford. You have probably realised that pharmacology, as well as other departments (Anatomy, Biochemistry), are very unhappy at the idea that they will vanish (that appears to be the fact of the matter, though it will no doubt be put differently by Malcolm). This is particularly so for Pharmacology, a double 5*A Department, a rank retained at every RAE so far.. I would have thought we would be considered as a jewel in the UCL crown, I am surprised we (UCL) appear so profligate with our frontline research Departments. Of course we have made many protests, and one consequence of this is that, whenever someone from Pharmacology expresses an opinion, they are greeted with what can only be described as a snigger "ah another pharmacologist". This attitude has caused grave offence to many of my colleagues. It may be good debating technique but it is no way to treat people.

After this experience, I have, with the very greatest reluctance, concluded that the long period of consultation has been essentially a sham, and that Malcolm is prepared to resort to dubious manoeuvres (like item 5.2 above) to impose his views. Quite why he is so reluctant to listen to the views of his best researchers beats me entirely. Without them, there would be no UCL.

Finally, let me emphasise again, we are all agreed that changes need to be made to both teaching and to departments. But we want some genuine say in what happens. We have not had that so far

Best regards
David Colquhoun

P.S. The views expressed in this letter are entirely my own, but if you would like another view of the academic board meeting, the following people, who were present, have said they are happy to talk to you if you wish.

[REDACTED]

Cc

[Redacted]

[Redacted]