

**An open letter to Professor Simon Gaskell,  
Principal of Queen Mary, University of London**

**25 April 2012**

Dear Principal

I was pleased to hear you summarise your strategic vision for Queen Mary at the Principal's Open Meeting last Thursday. I found your analysis of the current higher education landscape clear and convincing, and I wholly support the College's strategic objectives. I write today, however, to draw your attention to a specific situation where I believe strategy and tactics are in conflict, namely the current restructuring of the School of Biological and Chemical Sciences.

I fully support the declared aims of the proposed restructuring, but I am absolutely opposed to the chosen tactics, which I find unimaginative and unethical in equal measure. More importantly, I believe the tactics are at odds with the strategic vision that you outlined last Thursday, and are likely to wreak havoc on the student experience.

The restructuring is based on a simple plan. Measure research metrics against those of top quintile universities, then replace staff not meeting those metrics. Conceivably this plan could buy some short term tactical gain for REF 2014, but how much and at what cost? It has been argued elsewhere that the gains would be modest and unstable over the long term. In my opinion the plan offers, at best, a short term tactical advantage: the equivalent of seizing and attempting to hold a small piece of ground. Here, however, I wish to focus on a specific aspect of the second question: at what cost, and specifically, at what cost to the student experience we currently offer?

The faculty panel have now met to assess staff and it seems that about 20 staff fail to meet the criteria for "Teaching and Research" (T&R) roles in the new structure. Of these, 8 or 9 are to be offered "Teaching and Scholarship" (T&S) roles and 11 are believed to be at risk of redundancy. The scale of the potential teaching deficit is now clear. All programmes are deeply affected, but I note just two issues here: the biomedical sciences and psychology programmes, which recruit our most qualified students, are in danger of losing their hard-won accreditation status. Indeed, it seems barely conceivable that these programmes will be viable at all next September, unless staff whose roles are allegedly redundant agree to severance terms where they provide teaching cover for some fixed interim period. The alternative would be to cover the deficit with bought-in teaching, but even if this would be practically feasible in time for next September, we would face a public relations situation where the perception would be of a university that raises tuition fees to £9000 pa, fires experienced academic staff, then buys in supply teachers to cover the self-inflicted teaching deficit.

Principal, I was especially pleased to note your comment that we should view our role as cultivating relationships with our students rather than selling them products. But again, since I believe current tactics are at odds with our strategic vision, I would like to examine the likely nature of this relationship in the new structure we are about to experiment with.

Let us assume a best-case scenario. Staff offered T&S roles accept and sign their new contracts, while some staff whose roles are deemed redundant agree to provide fixed-term teaching cover. The Head of School, Matthew Evans, has promised our current undergraduates that disruption to their degree programmes will be minimal. At face value, the plan may seem workable and offer a chance of keeping Professor Evans' promise to undergraduates (assuming the contractual status of teaching academics is irrelevant to the student experience). From the undergraduate point of view, staff deemed redundant in the new structure would still be delivering teaching.

What of the student experience, the relationships which it is our role to cultivate? It seems the student relationship is to be entrusted to a cohort of demoralized academics, stigmatized as research failures, deemed by their own College to lack the prerequisites for T&R roles. And this really is the best case outcome, given the current tactics! If we consider the worst case scenario, there is a real possibility that some staff will reject the conclusion that their roles are redundant, and find the option of taking their chances in the employment tribunals more attractive than the prospect of T&S contracts that effectively kill their research careers, or voluntary severance agreements that require them to remain in place in some twilight teaching role while new research stars attempt to settle in place. If something even approaching this scenario takes place, then in September we will face a teaching catastrophe that could well do untold damage to the School's and the College's academic reputation for many years to come. Given the current levels of anger and disillusionment in the school, this worst case scenario cannot simply be discounted.

Principal, the risks are simply too great. I urge you to halt the proposed redundancies and engage with your staff. I believe we are willing to do everything possible to improve our School's research output, but we believe (as do many others outside the school) the short-term tactic of firing and hiring, maximizing REF return by minimizing student contact with research active staff, will just not work, and is totally at odds with the supposed added value provided by a degree from a Russell Group university.

Yours sincerely,

Peter Skorupski

The following staff add their names to this letter in support:

Dr Isaac Abrahams  
Professor John F Allen  
Dr Rachel Ashworth  
Dr Caroline Brennan  
Dr Brendan Curran  
Dr Ronald R Cutler  
Dr Adrian Dobbs  
Dr Tiina Eilola  
Dr Nathan Emery  
Dr Chris Faulkes  
Professor John Gurnell  
Dr Andrew Hirst  
Dr Rob Hughes  
Dr Keith Jensen  
Dr Rob Knell  
Dr Norbert Krauss  
Dr Steven Le Comber  
Dr Colin Malcolm  
Dr Alan McElligot  
Dr Alex Mesoudi  
Dr Fanis Missirlis  
Dr Jon Nield  
Dr Magda Osman  
Dr Bernardeta Parkin  
Dr Michael Proulx  
Mr John Puddefoot  
Dr Sujith Puthiyaveetil  
Dr Qazi Rahman  
Dr Jenny Schmid-Araya  
Dr Tippu Sheriff  
Dr Ralf Stanewsky  
Dr Angelika Stollewerk  
Professor Alice C. Sullivan  
Dr James Sullivan  
Professor Tony Vlcek  
Dr Robin Whelpton  
Dr Shane Wilkinson  
Dr Peter Wyatt