

Press Release

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Demoralisation at Queen's: report on crisis demands urgent response – UCU

A damning report on staff morale at Queen's University has revealed what the University College Union (UCU) today called 'a widespread crisis of confidence in senior management' at Queen's, one of Northern Ireland's largest employers. The 2016 Queen's Staff Survey report, released on Friday, shows that a whopping 71 per cent of staff no longer have confidence in senior leaders at the institution.

The UCU, which represents academics, researchers and academic-related staff, is now calling for an 'urgent meeting' of the university's ruling Senate body to consider 'immediate action to address this deepening crisis in university governance. They need to act—and act now.'

UCU President at Queen's, Dr Fabian Schuppert, claimed that 'punitive academic and professional standards put in place over recent years have put staff under increasing pressures and impossible demands, bringing morale to an all-time low. Staff have been told to meet impossible financial targets on research grant funding—targets which were set without staff consultation. The university's 'Size & Shape Review' has also put various parts of the university under threat of closure. This is very serious indeed. We can't afford a continuation of this situation at Queen's.'

The Staff Survey was completed by 2,479 of Queen's 3616 staff – or 69 per cent of all those eligible to respond – and contains damning findings on management-staff relations at the embattled institution. Queen's has been rocked by a series of controversies since current Vice Chancellor Patrick Johnston took office in March 2014, and the survey shows that staff are now no longer confident that he and the rest of the university's senior management team are up to the job.

'Politicians and members of Senate have a responsibility to ensure that public funding is being spent wisely and that Northern Ireland has a prestige university that can attract international scholars and educate the experts and innovators of the future.' Schuppert said.

'This report, which took tellingly far too long to release, confirms what we have reported for quite some time now: plummeting staff morale, increasing disenchantment with the university hierarchy, a sense that Queen's leaders are becoming notorious for all the wrong reasons,' Schuppert said. 'This is extremely worrying and it demands an immediate response. Senate can't be found asleep at the wheel.'

The report contains a range of shocking findings. Only 21 per cent of university staff now believe that their leaders are managing a raft of recent institutional changes effectively, with that statistic dropping to a shocking 7 per cent in the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, where recent planned cuts to Anthropology and Sociology had to be reversed recently after students and staff led a public campaign against management. A mere 43 per cent of staff throughout the university now believe that Queen's has a high standing internationally,

and only 46 per cent believe the university ‘cares about my health and wellbeing’. As for the survey itself, only 31 per cent of staff believe that ‘action will be taken on the results of this survey.’

‘It’s possibly worse than we would have expected,’ Schuppert said. ‘That staff feel this survey won’t lead to action is worrying, too. We are constantly under pressure from appraisals, yet when management receive a very negative appraisal from thousands of academics they expect to get away with no consequences. Leadership needs to be open, transparent, and above all, accountable.’

‘The report confirms that the deep-seated problems at Queen’s, if not addressed by the members of Senate, will see an increasing exodus of academics seeking employment elsewhere, and increasing numbers of international experts refusing to take up jobs at Queen’s. Nearly half of staff wouldn’t even recommend Queen’s as a place to work. This isn’t just bad for the university. It’s terrible for the local economy and for society in Northern Ireland more generally.’

There is something of a paradox in other findings of the survey, however, in that staff are generally very confident in their colleagues and happy with the levels of collaboration and co-operation amongst staff, the UCU representative said. ‘80 per cent of staff feel that people at Queen’s are willing to help each other and 85 per cent generally find that colleagues treat them with respect,’ Schuppert said. ‘This shows that Queen’s could be a great place to work. It shows that staff feel that – with a change of management behavior – this could be a really excellent international university.’

‘But overall the responses show an extremely worrying crisis of confidence in leadership, transparency, communication, performance management, institutional change and fairness across the range of management practices at Queen’s.’

‘We have been aware of many young staff and senior professors leaving the university in recent years, often with major grants and important research projects. Resourcing is also an issue—only 10 per cent of staff strongly agree that they have the necessary resources to do their job effectively. This bodes badly in terms of retention and recruitment. And this is bad too in terms of Stormont plans to build a high-skilled economy locally in future years.’

It is also ‘deeply troubling’ that Queen’s has not yet released commentary made by staff filling in the survey, the UCU representative claimed. ‘There was extensive space for commentary and we know anecdotally that many staff used this to express their deep frustrations with the direction the university is going in. Yet Queen’s has only presented a three bullet-point summary of reams of commentary from almost 2,500 staff. This would be laughable if it was not so serious. One of the most valuable fields in a survey is the “comment” field—a chance for respondents to feed back their thoughts, criticisms, and to elaborate the nuances of their opinions. Why were these not reported?’

‘Senate now needs to act quickly,’ Schuppert said. ‘They need to reconsider the Size & Shape Review at Queen’s, which has caused so much concern to staff—particularly in disciplines like Anthropology and Sociology, which were until recently faced with closure. Senate needs to force management to listen to staff and students on crucial matters such as academic standards. Those put in place to ensure the governance of this university is on a solid footing can’t waste any more time. If they do, the crisis will deepen. And the implications for staff, students and wider Northern Irish society will be laid at their door.’

ENDS.

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