

24.03.21 Senate Paper – Project Shape and Responsible Use of Metrics

Bearing in mind the power of Senate to discuss and declare an opinion on any matter relating to the University (Ordinance 19.5.15), and its power and duty to consider and approve schemes for the organisation of the Faculties, Schools, and other academic units of the University (Ordinance 19.5.5), this paper discusses the Project Shape restructuring process.

The paper will not discuss the confidential Consultation Process with Trade Unions. It will, however, seek a consensus within Senate on the wider issue of Responsible Use of Metrics, on the reputational impact of Project Shape, and on the staff consultation that is essential to ensure good decision-making.

Responsible Use of Metrics

We commend our University's signing of the San Francisco Declaration on Responsible Research Assessment (DORA), and its support of the Leiden Manifesto and the Hong Kong Principles. DORA is rightly embedded into our REF2021 Code of Practice (CoP).

There is a growing awareness amongst academics, institutions, and funding bodies that metrics must be used responsibly when evaluating the quality and impact of scientific outputs, to avoid incentivising poor science and to ensure that good science flourishes. The above and related documents provide a framework in which to develop best practice.

For example, DORA emphasises that “the scientific content of a paper is much more important than publication metrics” and the first principle of the Leiden Manifesto states that “quantitative evaluation should support qualitative, expert assessment” and the “indicators must not substitute for informed judgement”. It would, for example, not be good practice to evaluate researchers solely on citation indices, without expert evaluation of research outputs.

Principle 7 of the Leiden Manifesto states that the assessment of individual researchers should be based on a qualitative judgement of their portfolios. It would, for example, not be good practice to evaluate academics on Teaching and Research Contracts, only on their grant income and citation indices, and without consultation of their line managers.

Principles 4 and 5 of the Leiden Manifesto discuss the importance of assessment processes being open and transparent, with those being assessed being able to verify data and analysis. Best practice would require any assessments to be embedded into PDRs to support staff in excelling, and any concerns raised first in agreed Capability Procedures.

Reputational Damage

Academics representing DORA, The Hong Kong Principles, and the Leiden Manifesto, have written to the VC expressing their view that the University of Liverpool is in breach of those international standards, and, in the case of the DORA steering group, has requested ongoing dialogue with the VC to ensure compliance.

An open letter to the VC, signed by more than 2,000 academics, has demanded that the University stop using research metrics irresponsibly. International experts are boycotting the Faculty of Health and Life Sciences (HLS) in protest, and critiques have appeared in the national and international press and have been discussed by politicians. This is only a month into a process that is likely to last for many more months, may involve prolonged industrial action and clearly threatens to severely disrupt the University at a time when we cannot afford any further degradation in our relationships with students and key stakeholders.

The impression that our University is pioneering unethical and irresponsible use of research metrics is already damaging our standing in the international research community, and, potentially, grant funding bodies and the REF.

Consultation Processes

The initial Consultation Process on Project Shape did not consult on redundancies nor on the closing of any research area currently active in HLS. Project Shape was brought to Senate in June 2019 and January 2020, but Human Resource and Financial Implications were not raised.

Current proposals have provoked widespread anger across the staff and student body. A letter signed by more than 300 members of staff from HLS has asserted that those selected for potential redundancy were never made aware of the metrics that were being applied to them, and that they were not made aware of performance problems as part of the PDR process. In many cases the relevant Heads of Department and Heads of School were reportedly unaware that staff had been selected for this pool.

Whilst strategic vision will be expected from the Senior Leadership Team, it would be necessary to have expert opinion from academic staff, through proper consultation processes and Senate procedures, on any decision to close research areas and implement redundancies.

Action

The University of Liverpool must have open and transparent processes that unequivocally demonstrate alignment with the principles outlined in DORA, the Leiden Manifesto, the Hong Kong Principles, and our REF21 CoP. We look forward to seeing, and feeding back on, the work of the Open Research Team in developing an institutional policy on the Responsible Use of Metrics and its implementation plan. However, given the current controversies around Project Shape, some adjustment in processes is necessary as a matter of urgency.

To prevent further reputational damage, and to ensure that restructuring provides the best possible environment for science at HLS to excel, we propose that Project Shape be paused, and that the current threat of redundancies be withdrawn. If the strategic vision is to close research areas and implement redundancies, staff consultation must be reopened, and any subsequent proposal be brought to Senate. The duties and powers of the Senate in this regard are clearly laid out in Ordinance 19.5.