

“Vision” in HE



From Lexico.com:

vision /'vɪʒ(ə)n/

the ability to think about or plan the future with imagination or wisdom.

"the organization had lost its vision and direction"

synonyms: imagination, creativity, creative power, inventiveness, innovation, inspiration, intuition, perceptiveness, perception, breadth of view, foresight, insight, far-sightedness, prescience, discernment, awareness, penetration, shrewdness, sharpness, cleverness



“*Vision*” in HE

This has been an eventful year at the University of Surrey, with

- a Continuous Improvement Programme launched early in the year by Senior Management,
- an extensive Enhanced Voluntary Severance Scheme,
- a Student Referendum about satisfaction with the University leadership, and
- an all staff Vote of No Confidence in the VC and Executive Board.

In response to these events, Surrey UCU ran a member survey in July looking for constructive routes for moving forward.

We asked:

Is the Continuous Improvement Programme good; bad, or a little bit Kafkaesque? What is the University’s plan and ‘vision’? What do you think the vision should be?

In these unusual times since the announcement of the Enhanced Voluntary Severance Scheme in February, we are interested in your views and constructive proposals that address the challenges currently faced in the HE sector.

1. In light of recent events, what institutional changes or action do you think would restore the confidence of staff and students in the senior university management?

In response to this question, many members reported that trust has broken down to a considerable extent. Approximately half the participants considered the level of trust to be so low that it is “irretrievable” given the current make-up of the Executive Board. Many members stated that trust could only be restored by the resignation and removal of key Executive Board members, in addition to the VC.

Many members also reported that University of Surrey’s key values have been lost, that the stated values need to be reviewed, and that as a result they do not feel appreciated as staff members. For example, one comment was that the University needs to “realise our staff are an asset, our mantra, and never forget that ever again”.

In terms of action that would help restore confidence, we received comments to the effect that there is a “serious need” for a long period of stability, for example, “a clear budget plan that is made available would help so as to see that the next 5 to 10 years are planned in a reasonable and understandable way, without ‘surprises’ (and this would include knowing if there are plans to cut budgets/departments further)” and that there needs to be proper consultation processes in place in order to protect staff terms and conditions (e.g. in the form of “protecting our Pensions”).

2. Please suggest some constructive, positive proposals for the University of Surrey that engage with the challenges that HE faces at present

Many members recognised that the University of Surrey faces challenges. However, comments revealed frustration that instead of engaging with these challenges by championing and defending education, the University is concentrating on more “superficial” activities. Members said that it would be more constructive if the University would openly “start lobbying the government to properly fund institutions, openly challenge the Augar review (as it fundamentally destroys the moral principles of educational equity)” and “avoid engaging with large projects” and “spending on buildings”.

Members would prefer to see “that corporate decision making is open and honest and takes account of operational activities”, as well as better consultation practices and “a central library of lessons learned from various endeavours to avoid repeating mistakes”. Many comments noted that staff should be celebrated and should be incorporated into decision making processes, in order to create a culture of trust.

Members also saw “funding for enough staff” as a priority, so that the university does not “simply overwork staff, assuming that we should work over our contracted hours”.

3. What is your vision for the University of Surrey?

It is important to stress that the comments we received in answer to this question were remarkably similar and in tune with each other. Members reported on a vision of Surrey that would be “a true academic institution that realises the need to take a transdisciplinary approach in delivering the knowledge it offers to support a modern world”, where the arts and sciences are valued equally, as well as there being parity of recognition for teaching and research. In order to achieve this, “It would have to be that management recognise the commitment of staff, the amount of time that staff put into enabling an amazing environment of learning for students, as well as a strong research environment (even while the lack of support is so obvious).” Another comment described the route to this as “a University led by senior managers who have the humility to recognise that they’re the equal colleagues of Surrey’s staff and students and then behave accordingly, working in a real partnership with staff and students to grow the University sensibly. In brief, a University that’s rid of a clique of senior managers who think Surrey is their own private business, something to be used to satisfy personal and corporate greed.”

Comments also mentioned the role of students, hoping that the University could become a place where “students and staff will want to come to study and work because of the stimulating, nourishing, productive, inclusive and safe environment, and for us to be famous for being a desirable place to work”, as well as a place where “engaged students” could take “responsibility for their learning journey.”

Comments also reflected the feeling that Surrey is currently a long way from this positive vision, for example: “My vision of the University is the opposite to the above, I would liken us to a factory” and “CIP measures are never going to create a “vision” as they’re generally punitive and provoke too much anxiety about their lack of transparency.”



4. What is your “vision” of a HE institution?

Those members who preferred their comments to be summarised as part of a general piece reported that their vision of a HE institution would include prioritising respect for core values such as integrity, rather than money being the driving factor. They believed that the interests of staff should be at the heart of each University and that each institution should recognise its uniqueness within the HE sector.

Some members agreed that their comments could be quoted verbatim. These include:
I appreciate that the times are challenging, but a HE institution should be able to listen to its staff and realise that putting students first does not mean "bribing" them with sparks and glitter, but attracting them with high quality teaching.

Inclusive, consultative, forward thinking, collegiate, kind. A place which takes its public service remit seriously. Speaks truth to power. Reaches out to its community. Seeks collaborative relationship. Listens to its constituents and stake-holders.

A place to develop critical thinking, challenge the status quo, and generally advance knowledge.

A place where teaching and research are both fully supported.

A community of scholars, upholding timeless principles of truth & freedom while pushing the boundaries of knowledge and thought across a wide range of disciplines. Students and staff working together to generate new learning opportunities.

I would like to become more like a family where we take care of each other.

A supportive and open space for learning, where students are facilitated to broaden their knowledge and where they are able to engage with those who have been researching these topics for extensive periods of time. HE should support researchers/ academics/tutors in their research development as this is what makes the environment lively and interactive.

A place for learning, teaching, research, responsible in the community.

A public good, not a business. Students are partners in learning, not customers. Academics are scholars, not entrepreneurs. All other staff jobs should be for the purpose of the public good.

An HEI whose EB demonstrates leadership on public sector values - openness, honesty, transparency, humility, respect for tax payers and fee payers.

A place where knowledge is increased and our students grow as scholars and people.

Contact

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