

COUNCIL FOR COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY ENGLISH

Minutes of the OGM Business Meeting

Held on 4th December, 2010
at the Institute of Advanced Legal Studies
University of London

1. The Chair, Linda Anderson, welcomed members to the meeting.
2. The Minutes of the 2010 AGM Business Meeting were approved. There were no matters arising.

3. Treasurer's Report (this item was taken next):

The Treasurer, Nahem Yousaf, reported a healthy state of finances, with just over £11,600 in the bank. CCUE subscriptions for 2010-11 had already been received from 25 departments. The total numbers of departments subscribed in 2009-10 had remained the same as in the previous year, i.e. 55 (out of a possible 96), and it was anticipated that this figure would be maintained or increased in the current year.

However, ESSE subs were down from €941 for 549 members in 2009 to €3294 for the 366 members in 2010. A number of departments had expressed concern at the increased ESSE subscription charge, which may account for the reduction. In order to increase take-up, the CCUE Executive had decided at its meeting the previous day that requests for renewal of CCUE subscriptions should also include the clear recommendation that standard practice would be for departments to pay for subscriptions to ESSE for 40-50% of their staff.

Since November 2009, c. £17,000 had been paid out in expenses, including conference costs and other items.

2. Chair's Report

Full text of the oral report given by the Chair:

'These are difficult times in terms of the future of the Arts and Humanities. Reading the Browne Report yesterday as I travelled down through a landscape made unfamiliar by deep snow, I was finding it impossible not to draw analogies between the weather and the harsh environment we're now entering in Higher Education. However, one of the things I want to emphasize today is the importance of taking a long view and not losing sight of our own values and principles, though that will be cold comfort for those of you who will feel the direct effects of cuts on your lives and careers. Our present government is short-sighted as we know; but what we must remember is that is also temporary. I'll talk a little in a moment about what I see as CCUE'S role in the current situation and what we can, and should, be doing to try to safeguard the future.

A vote will be taken this Thursday (9th December) in the House of Commons which could raise the current cap on student fees in England to a lower limit of £6k and an upper one of £9k. It is important to remember that the situation in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland is different, though undoubtedly whatever decision is taken at Westminster will influence policy and decisions elsewhere. Vice-chancellors have been divided in their

response: anxieties about the effect on students of raising fees have been matched by anxieties about what will happen if that particular route towards the future funding of Universities is blocked. The vote is taking place in the context of an already agreed 80% cut in teaching funding, which includes the removal of any funding for subjects in bands C and D (arts, humanities and social sciences).

As you know the Browne report, which provides the ‘intellectual’ context for present policy decisions, was set up by a Labour government and has been long awaited. The fact that it was ‘in process’ meant there was little discussion of the future of Higher Education during the election campaign in the Spring. What is surprising, therefore, is that its conclusions are based on a series of consultations and ‘50 hours of panel time’: a short time we might think, just over a week, to change fundamentally the basis of Higher Education. I want to highlight four assumptions that seem to be driving this report and which, to my mind, do not stand up to scrutiny. They are:

1. That an unregulated market will drive up quality in Higher Education; this, despite the fact that the market has done little to prove itself the guardian of quality elsewhere in society.
2. That students will be given the power to choose which University to go to and which course to take, and these choices, which will determine the future shape of Higher Education, will be predicated on the quality of the offering which Universities make (i.e. the least worthy may not survive). This seems naive both about the multiple factors which influence choice – which may be different for different groups – and the quality of information provided by league tables, NSS or other forms of data gathering.
3. That students will ‘naturally’ want to take courses which give them the best guaranteed return in terms of future salaries. Is this necessarily true?
4. That the business community has identified the need for the skills and knowledge provided by the so called ‘priority’ subjects, the STEM subjects, to drive forward the future prosperity of the UK. Not only does this downplay the contribution made by graduates in Arts and Humanities to business, it also fails to recognise the contribution that might be made by Arts and Humanities to a critical understanding of political and other values, including the values of the business community itself.

The other aspects of the report to highlight are that it recommends parity for part-time students, in terms of how they pay fees, and it has nothing to say about postgraduate students, though there is a widespread belief that postgraduate fees will have to rise to match undergraduate fees.

CCUE’s response

One of the immediate outcomes of the cuts for us is that funding for subject centres has been removed, and finances concentrated in the centralised part of HEA in York. We have been talking about the need not to lose the excellent work of the English Subject Centre and how CCUE might help to support some of its work in the future. There will be a meeting early in 2011 between members of CCUE Executive, the English Association and the English Subject Centre to outline a strategy for the future.

The publication of the Impact Pilot study for English has been welcomed by the Executive. The report manages to define ‘Impact’ in terms of English Language and Literature without

having to distort or change our current practices and forms of engagement with external partners. It makes an important case for how English as a subject already has societal 'impact' in various different ways. These are useful arguments for us to be able to draw on over the next difficult period in Higher Education.

The Executive has decided to prepare a report about the importance of English as a subject and the contribution it makes to both contemporary culture and society, which will be launched at a future CCUE meeting. We will identify some of our 'celebrity' graduates, and ask them to write briefly about how an English degree helped them in their careers. We will try to get maximum publicity for the launch of the report.

We also would like to enhance our website and use it as a way of disseminating ideas. It may be useful if we can link with other high profile campaigns, like the campaign about reading (distribution of a million books) and The Ministry of Stories.

The idea is that we use the sense of crisis to generate a sense of excitement about our subject, and make the case for ourselves as strongly as we can. CCUE will continue to work closely with the English Association, and will seek alliances with other subject associations as well.'

3. Discussion

The Chair's report was followed by a lively discussion in which it was agreed that, in addition to the steps already outlined, CCUE would write a letter to David Willetts, the Minister for Universities and Science, in advance of Thursday's House of Commons vote, voicing the concern of English lecturers about proposed changes in the funding of Higher Education, in particular the withdrawal of public funding from the teaching of Arts and Humanities subjects. The letter would also be sent to editors of national newspapers and, time permitting, to prominent MPs.

The Chair thanked the membership for their support and noted down salient points from the discussion that would be incorporated in the letter. The text of the letter would be drafted by members of the Executive, and a finalised version circulated to members via email. The letter would subsequently be posted on the CCUE website.

4. AOB

There being no other business, the meeting was closed.

David Duff, CCUE Secretary, 31 March 2011