

Life Sciences Paper to Senate

A paper by the President

IMPERIAL COLLEGE SENATE

Life Sciences 'Restructure'

A paper by Imperial College Union and the University and College Union at Imperial

Background

1. The restructure of Life Sciences was announced at Council in July 2010; the consultation process followed and concluded on 6 September 2010.
2. The original restructure document proposed to delete the sections of Plant & Microbial Sciences (PMS) and Cell Biology & Functional Genomics (CBFG) and replace them with Integrated Cell Biology.
3. There were many concerns at the time, which were outlined in submissions to the consultation by the Imperial College Union, the University and College Union, the Graduate Student Association and staff from the Department. These concerns were:
 - a) That although the restructure was mainly focused on improving research performance, data from the Department itself has been analysed independently to show that there is no difference in research output between PMS and the other sections.
 - b) That the sections being cut were those which contained academics who contribute a large proportion of teaching in Life Sciences. Statistics were also provided to prove this was the case. It was also pointed out that a great deal of important administrative work was carried out by staff in the affected sections.
 - c) That specific parts of Biology and Biochemistry undergraduate and postgraduate degrees have been targeted and that the proposal would lead to the loss of important areas of science at Imperial.
 - d) That misleading statements were made about the need to compete with Research Institutes such as the John Innes Centre and Rothamsted; these Institutes do not teach Undergraduates and we collaborate with them on a regular basis.
 - e) The significant reasons for the Departmental deficit were not being taken into account. Most acutely, the recent closure of Wye involved many of the academics now facing redundancy for 'poor research' who (not that we believe they do have poor research) should surely have been given more time to adjust to their new facilities and begin research after being effectively shut down.
 - i. In fact Imperial should applaud those very people who, after such a move, have driven their research output up so much to what it is today.
4. In late September 2010 the final restructure document was released. It had no substantial difference to the original proposal. In it, the Review Panel who discussed the submissions, claimed to address the concern raised. We believe that, although they provided reasons to

reject our concerns, the theme behind each reason was that they had considered our objections but did not think they were significant.

- a) We are concerned about this because we provided statistical evidence proving, for example, the superior amount of teaching done by those academics potentially affected. The Review Panel however dismissed this without providing any evidence of their own.
- b) There was also no representation on the Review Panel from anyone from the sections at risk of deletion. There was also no external member on the Review Panel. The review panel comprised of people with a conflict of interest. The loss of PMS and CBFG meant that their own sections were not cut, restructured or looked into.

Current Situation

1. In late November 2010, the results of the restructure were revealed and the process below followed, which brings us to today. I point this out to show the depth of feeling on this issue.
 - a) Academics and PhD students began to notify the Union on 2 December that those affected had been told by email about their redundancy. No meeting with PhD students was planned by the Department to explain what was happening.
 - b) Information got out extremely quickly. Within hours, Undergraduates had started emailing the ICU asking what was happening. PhD students came for a meeting in the ICU.
 - c) Students began to form under a Facebook group, encouraging people to sign a petition.
 - d) The ICU organised a meeting where the Head of Department and the Head of Faculty could explain the restructure; students and staff were invited.
 - e) The meeting occurred on 8 December. More than 400 students and staff attended. Many students and staff were also carrying plants as a symbol of protest, an act which had been organised in advance. The Head of Department and Head of Faculty made an hour long presentation on the restructure before questions. Afterwards the ICU asked those assembled en masse if their concerns had been helped by the meeting. The view on this was 100% no. We believe this is because the questions asked remained unanswered and that it was stated, despite the concerns and general feeling of injustice, that no changes would be made to the plan.
 - f) Statements against the restructure have been received from a wide variety of sources including academics from Oxford, UCL, Reading, Royal Holloway, Bath, the Director of the John Innes Centre and the President of the British Society for Plant Pathology.

The Concerns

1. 14 members of academic staff are being made redundant.
2. These individuals represent 15% of the Department's staff and cover 25% of the Undergraduate teaching hours for the Biology and Biochemistry degrees. They are also extremely popular lecturers and have received widespread support from students and staff at Imperial as well as elsewhere.
3. The staff being made redundant include all six major teaching admin roles for the Biology and Biochemistry degrees (DUGS, Senior tutors, Admissions tutors)

4. There is no plan as to how this teaching time or major administrative roles will be filled.
5. Since the Department targeted the restructure at increasing funding from research, we doubt that anyone will be incentivised to take up extra teaching.
6. Academics from the Department have stated that six final year Undergraduate modules from Biology and six final year modules from Biochemistry are 'unteachable' following the redundancies.
7. The effect on PG training has not been thought through. The loss of this number of staff leaves significant amounts of students having to transfer supervisors and the pool of projects MRes students can choose from has been catastrophically reduced.
8. The original consultation did not take into account any views expressed in submissions, even though they were predominantly against the planned restructure. All issues being raised here were highlighted during the consultation submission period but no planning has been announced.
9. Imperial College seemingly withdrawing from Plant sciences despite relevant Research council/government priorities and Food security issues recently highlighted by the Royal Society.
10. The attack on academic freedom at Imperial by abolishing teaching and research in several subjects.

Senate Resolves

- 1. To immediately freeze the restructure of Life Sciences and the redundancies until after the proposed Departmental Teaching Review.**
- 2. To make representation to College Council that after the Teaching Review, any restructure, if necessary, should be restarted from scratch taking into account the concerns in the original consultation submissions.**