

The Educator

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Oppose MMU EQUAL Reforms

Last year workers and students at MMU were faced with a number of issues which put them into direct conflict with management. The beginning of 2010 was marked by the continuation of the dispute over job losses amongst support staff. As this dispute came to an end with the reduction of the number of compulsory redundancies to 30, due in no small part to the valiant stand of Unison members (in the face of threats of legal action), members of UCU found themselves faced with the imposition of dramatic changes to the delivery of undergraduate programmes in the form of the EQAL proposals.

Union activists at MMU had correctly pointed out during the UNISON dispute that the proposed 127 job losses was the first of a wave of attacks on jobs, conditions and on education, which is why we called for all unions and students at MMU to stand together to defend staff and build for a united fightback that could spring into action when necessary.

EQAL represents an attack on education dressed up as a way of making undergraduate programmes more “efficient” and more in tune with what students want. Since the second term, when the plans were announced, academic staff across the university have expressed their opposition to both the content of EQAL and to the way in which it was being imposed with virtually no consultation. Students in particular were excluded from any opportunity to consult and respond to the proposals. Despite management’s oft repeated claims to wanting to “enhance student experience”, they did not consider it necessary to consult the students representatives over such a fundamental change to the undergraduate programme.

One of the biggest changes to undergraduate teaching is the reduction of the number of subject units available to students. Large, standardised units considered to have more “market value” will dominate the curriculum and the well established 6x20 credit formula will be replaced by a 4x30 formula; instead of having 6 units to choose from, students will be offered 4. By reducing the number of units, student choice will be considerably undermined. There will be less opportunity to study those subjects which are more specialised and marginal to programmes, i.e. the kind of subjects which can expand the range of knowledge and critical thinking skills to which students are exposed. Whilst we have been assured repeatedly that no jobs will be lost as a

result of the changes, the stated aim of the VC to remove “low demand modules” is more than likely to result in job losses as some lecturers find their modules disappear.

Another aspect of EQAL is to standardise the way units function administratively so that, for example, turnaround times for the return of marks and feedback are the same throughout the university. This means that all units regardless of size and the make up of the academic staff will be working to the same timescale. For example, some units may have a high proportion of hourly paid lecturers whose conditions of work may not enable them to deliver feedback on large numbers of scripts to tight schedules. So EQAL is also a way of micro-managing the academic workforce via centralised control of the delivery of units. This inevitably means ignoring the specific characteristics of individual units. Of course students want to be assured of the timely delivery of marks and feedback, however such rigid control may lead to a reduced quality of feedback as lecturers on some units struggle to keep to strict timeframes. The solution to student concerns about marking and feedback time does not lie in bureaucratic measures to enforce increased turnaround times, it lies in investing in education to ensure that staff to student ratios appropriately reflect workloads associated with units.

Little wonder then that across faculties academic staff have been raising deep-seated concerns over the direction which management is taking. Members with long experience of designing course programmes have called to attention the deeply flawed nature of EQAL and see it as little more than a way of bringing in job losses through the back door (hourly paid lecturers being particularly vulnerable).

The idea that you can standardise the student “experience” (as management jargon puts it) across faculties by creating a checklist of key features across academic disciplines is an absurd one. Students choose particular disciplines for different reasons, the kind of “experience” an English literature student will want is likely to differ from the kind of “experience” a Business studies student will want.

This points to the wider issue that Higher Education (HE) is currently facing as universities are being transformed from places of academic development and inquiry into “factories” for churning out graduates that fit

the profile that employers are demanding. This encroachment of business into education is not new. Blair’s New Labour government adhered to a education strategy that positively encouraged the role of the private sector and employers in shaping our education system, from secondary schools through to tertiary education, reducing the value of education to “employability” and business needs. What is new with the ConDem government is the speed and irreversibility of the attacks that students and workers in education are being subjected to. If the government gets away with increasing fees and withdrawing funding from teaching, the whole landscape of higher education in Britain will be drastically redrawn. Many universities which currently attract working class students will go to the wall, whilst undergraduate and post-graduate programmes will be geared even more to those that the big employers deem relevant as universities are forced to seek more partnerships with the private sector to stay afloat.

There danger that the current wider struggle to defend education will push local issues such as EQAL into the background. There is an even greater danger that management will use the funding cuts to emphasise the need for the kind of radical transformation that EQAL will bring about. Indeed, in the wake of the Browne Review, management sent a message to staff informing us that EQAL will allow MMU to remain “competitive” within the context of the introduction of complete privatisation of HE teaching in the UK. A cynical attempt to take advantage of the anxiety of education workers and students to scare us into accepting EQAL.

Workers and students need to fight together on all fronts. Struggles around local issues can be important building blockings for mobilising the HE community for national sector-wide struggles. The rally last summer in support of UCU’s campaign against EQAL came on the back of the magnificent mobilisation in defense of jobs at MMU. Both these campaigns put us in a better position to mobilise for the student demonstrations in November and December. Similarly a strong united movement in the Manchester universities against the government’s plans will give UCU members at MMU the confidence and strength to resist the changes being imposed at MMU as well as government attacks on jobs and pensions when we ballot for strike action later this month.

