Durham University is proposing online-only degrees as part of a radical restructuring process, Palatinate can reveal.

Confidential documents seen by Palatinate show that the University is planning “a radical restructure” of the Durham curriculum in order to permanently put online resources at the core of its educational offer, in response to the Covid-19 crisis and other ongoing changes in both national and international Higher Education.

The proposals seek to “invert Durham’s traditional educational model”, which revolves around residential study, replacing it with one that puts “online resources at the core enabling us to provide education at a distance.”

**The proposals seek to “invert Durham’s traditional education model”**

The proposals were authored by Deputy Vice-Chancellor Antony Long and Vice-Provost (Education) Alan Houston in a report titled “Redesigning Durham’s Educational Offer”. An audit of the University’s digital content, undertaken due to the Covid-19 crisis, found that Durham has so far been slow to develop an online educational offer compared to its competitors. The proposals “require a new design to the Durham University curriculum” in order that all degree programmes can be fully-accessible remotely.

It is considered that under the proposals some students would just use online resources, some would study full-time in Durham and others a mixture of both. The planned starting point is that for the 2020/21 academic year, all of Durham’s current educational offer will be available online alongside the existing residential degrees.

**Under the proposals, some students would just use online resources**

The University wants all modules for 2020-21 to conform to a “Minimum Viable Product” by June, in readiness for the start of 2020-21 academic year. Under the proposals, the number of “live” modules taught next academic year will be reduced by 25%, bringing the number taught at Durham to around 1200. It is hoped that by October 2020 the University will have its key postgraduate and first year undergraduate programmes online, weighted by “international market potential”.

The University wants further roll-out of online modules beyond next academic year and the Covid-19 crisis. Overall, the aim is that there will be at least 500 modules fully online by the end of the 2020/21 academic year, with an agreed further roll-out in 2021/22.

A further element to the plan is flexible start dates, so students can start their degree programmes in October, January or April in order to better align with other international Higher Education partners.

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The plans have so far been developed without consultation of staff or students, although it is understood that market research of students is a priority. However, details of the proposals have been leaked to staff, who have identified a number of perceived issues.

A letter to Vice-Chancellor Stuart Corbridge, expressing concern with the proposal, has over 300 signatures from academic staff. It says: “We find the far-reaching changes proposed in the document to be highly concerning. Given the scope and impact of the changes, we are also concerned by the timetable for their ratification, which does not allow for any meaningful consultation, market analysis, or risk assessment.

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The letter continues: “In some cases, entire pathways within departments will be placed under existential threat, e.g. the performance pathway in the [music](https://www.palatinate.org.uk/tag/music/) department, which is central to the department’s undergraduate offering.

“The document contains no discussion of the pedagogical objectives or effects of the changes. Pedagogical, as well as financial, imperatives must surely be at the heart of any changes to Durham’s teaching model.

“We are not opposing contingency measures, which are a necessary component of immediate term planning in the current crisis. The proposal to make permanent changes to the curriculum in the midst of a global health crisis is, however, both cynical and reckless.”

**DUCU passed a motion to call for “abandoning any radical restructure of the University in the midst of a pandemic”.**

The Durham branch of the University and College Union (DUCU) held an Emergency General Meeting (EGM) to establish a response to the proposals.

In a statement to Palatinate, DUCU said: “Durham UCU is deeply concerned about the proposals circulated in the ‘Durham Redesign’ documents. Today we held an Emergency General Meeting with over 180 members in attendance which voted to firmly oppose rushed long-term changes taken without proper consultation.

“To date, there has been no consultation with DUCU about the proposals. We support online learning as part of the response to the covid-19 crisis but the approach currently being floated is for a permanent change, and one that will not benefit staff or students.

“Our concerns include the implications for degree programmes of a 25% reduction in modules for next year and how this will affect staff and students. UCU is opposed to any outsourcing of the delivery or planning of teaching and learning, and we are thus also concerned about the involvement of a private education company to roll out some of these proposals.”

A meeting of the Senate, the University’s supreme governing body, had been planned to meet earlier today (15th April). Palatinate understands that this meeting has been instead delayed to allow more time for those present to read and understand the proposals. Senate will now meet to discuss and vote on the proposals next week.

**Questions:**

1. Discuss the relevance of this case to Employment Relations. (500 words)

2. Discuss the managerial style evidenced in this case. (400 words)

(Choose any **one** from paternalistic, consultative, authoritarian, opportunist or constitutional)

3. Discuss how this case evidences the position of Higher Education institutions as global actors. (500 words)

You can take help from:

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