

Dear Colleague,

As you may know, we will be reviewing the means by which we all communicate with one another in order to better promote mutual understanding across the Faculty. In the meantime, I thought it might be useful to provide you with a monthly update on what I am doing and on topical issues.

I have spent much of my time over the last few weeks in various forms of induction, meeting people, establishing relationships, trying to understand organisational structures and to become familiar with policies and processes. This is no different from what happens with any new employee. The highlight was welcoming a room full of recently appointed academic staff and talking to them about the University and the Faculty of Humanities. This was two weeks into the job! While my new colleagues may not have learned a great deal, I thoroughly enjoyed meeting them.

In the few moments of spare time available I have been exploring the campus. It has been interesting to visit some of our buildings without a guide, looking into seminar rooms, standing in corridors with students, slipping into the back of lecture theatres, listening to music practice in the Martin Harris building, looking at notice boards and even picking up stray snippets of conversation among staff. Sounds a bit like Channel 4's 'Undercover Boss' which is far too dramatic, but it all helps to build up a picture.

I have begun a cycle of attending School management meetings which offer an insight into organisational culture and into the challenges facing local managers. I have more of these to do and I will also be attending School Boards in due course.

Welcome Week was noisy and a bit of a shock. Even if I was thirty-plus years younger I don't think *Filthy Rich* would hold much attraction. However, it was fun going to the Welcome Fair, the Student's Union and I went through the registration process from start to finish. I was registered as a female engineering student! It is an impressive organisational achievement and all those involved in it are to be congratulated.

Early impressions of The University of Manchester are firstly the sheer scale of everything, especially for someone arriving from a small institution in a remote seaside town. We certainly know how to do BIG. Secondly, we like to collect data and I am looking forward to my first Operational Performance Review (OPR) on 3 November. Thirdly, and most importantly, we are engaged in some remarkable work.

I still have not scratched the surface, but it has been a revelation to discover so much cutting-edge, durable and influential research going on in our midst. To cite just one example, it was a great honour to be asked to welcome delegates to the Chronic Poverty Research Centre's international conference on 'Ten Years of War Against Chronic Poverty' and to hear about research that is making a real difference to the lives of some of the world's poorest people. I am looking forward to finding out even more about what we are doing in the months ahead.

We are also very good at teaching. That is something we need to say more often. We are very good at teaching. We have great lecturers teaching exciting topics to very talented students who graduate with valuable degrees. That is a formula for success.

Of course we should always ask if we could do better. That is true of everything we do, be it our research, our teaching or the administrative part of our jobs, just as it is true of our cooking, golf swing or parenting. In the context of teaching, we need to ask ourselves if we are really giving our students the best learning experience that lies within our gift to give as a Personal Tutor, Director of Teaching and Learning, Programme Director, Lecturer, Dean of Faculty or Head of Discipline. There is a limit to what we can do – usually some combination of time and money – but there are also excuses we make for ourselves. And there is a state of mind that stops us even wanting to ask ourselves the question ‘Can I do better?’.

The humanities, especially the traditional arts, are likely to face very tough times in the immediate future. We are not seen by government and business as making as essential a contribution to economic development as other disciplines, and our graduates are seen as not finding meaningful employment as easily as those with scientific and professional degrees. As a Faculty and a University, we need to challenge that view and demonstrate the contribution that the humanities, and the arts in particular, are making to the wider society.

Furthermore, it may be that students will be asked to pay more in future. Like any client they will seek value for money, value being measured in the quality of the learning experience and future employability. We cannot risk the enormous reputational damage that will be done by the reporting of further adverse NSS results. We owe it to ourselves as professionals to do the best we can do and we owe it to our students. Furthermore, the consequences of failing to take action could be catastrophic.

As Vice-President and Dean, I am part of the University’s leadership team and responsible to the President of the University for the business of this Faculty, and the quality of our teaching is at the very core of that business. I cannot address the issues that most concern the student body by simply issuing edicts, nor can Heads of Schools deal with it on their own. Regulations are important, but the problems we face are cultural and are embedded in our attitudes and behaviours.

We can all start by asking ourselves if we are truly doing the best we can as teachers. Will one more office hour a week really stop me writing my book? Can that over-large class be split in two in order to create the ambience needed for meaningful communication? Will answering that student’s e-mails promptly make a difference to her worries about her essay? Is two hours a week really enough time in which to impart to this class the wonderful and exciting ideas that attracted me to a career in a university in the first place?

We don’t have a lot of time to do what must be done. I know what I have to do as Dean, but I need your help. I hope you will be able to join with me in doing what each of us needs to do if we are to make what is already a very good learning experience a truly great one.

Best wishes,

Keith