

In support of counselling services: higher education

At a time of increasing financial constraint and restructuring initiatives, Ruth Caleb talks to Professor Sir **Bob Burgess**, Vice Chancellor of the University of Leicester, himself at the forefront of several innovations in higher education

ensure that we make every single thing very clear and that is certainly a challenge at the moment, because in order to explain the new fee structure, we are going to need to come up with a language that can identify to students what the implications are: that they will not have to pay up front nor will their parents; and that they will only start repaying after graduation, once they earn over £21,000 a year; and that they have 30 years to pay it off. That is a considerable number of messages to have to convey.

What major changes have you experienced in the role of Vice Chancellor since you started at Leicester over 12 years ago?

When I arrived, we had 17,000 students; we now have 23,000. Leicester did not have distance learning students then; now just under one third of our students study by distance. And there are students taking mainly vocationally oriented master's degrees; indeed, some study counselling. The demands made on students now are higher, particularly with regard to employment and employability, and students have a greater choice of courses; every year the number of courses increase and that makes choosing a university that much more challenging.

Quite a lot of courses have also been cut, like the sciences.

My experience is that a lot of students now are looking for courses that are directly vocational or semi-vocational – they are so afraid of not getting jobs. In that sense, the popular press, with screaming headlines about student unemployment, does not help, especially when we know there are still vacancies and that if students apply for them, some, one accepts not all, will get employment. There are still opportunities that exist,



Ruth Caleb: *How would you describe your own student experience?*

Bob Burgess: I was a student in Durham in the late 1960s and early 1970s. I first went to university to do a three-year teacher training course, followed by a degree in sociology and I am always pleased that I chose to go to Durham because I like the scale of the city. I had grown up in a small village in south Somerset and so Durham felt a very big place to me, but it also felt comfortable because it was very student focused. If you come from a family that has no experience of universities, words like 'seminars', 'tutorials', 'classes', 'halls of residence', and 'colleges' are not terribly clear. We need to get beyond the labels and in that sense make it very clear what being at university is all about.

That is something we find as counsellors: part of what depresses people is that they are in 'the wrong place', through the cultural use of language, which is very specific.

Yes, people need to feel engaged and comfortable to get the best from their education. We need to work hard to

you just sometimes have to come at it a different way.

One of the huge changes since I started at Brunel is the widening access to education. We are getting a large number of students who are older, with more complex lives caring for parents or children, who would not be able to take advantage of such opportunities as volunteering, internships and the like and I just wonder how these students might be affected?

Widening participation is something I have always been keen on because I am the first in my family ever to have gone to university, and indeed it would be a mark of hypocrisy if I were not keen. One of the things that pleases me greatly is that the last year the old library operated, there were 800,000 users, and in the first year the new library opened there were 1.5 million visits. We open at less social times and the only days we closed were Christmas Day and New Year's Day. We did a survey and there was no day with fewer than 200 people in the library; that made it worthwhile. Leicester recruits many international students and they tend not to go home over the Christmas period. While it is a religious festival for some people, it is not for others, so you have to think about the different clientele.

Is it that this is all geared up to conventional 18 year olds and one of the challenges is how do you organise life so that those people who attend as mature students are able to benefit from everything that university has to offer?

That is part of the ongoing debate. Meanwhile, we have trialled the HE achievement report and are beginning to roll it out to other institutions. I hope from September 2012 any student registering at a university will start to develop a HE achievement report so it can be used diagnostically in relation to the work that they do – to see that they get what they want from the programme and also in terms of future employability.

That also makes it easier to catch problems before they reach the end of the year, which is too late for many because we know most students who leave, leave within the first year.

Yes.

Sometimes it is not easy to encourage staff to go along with all the changes they need to take on board.

It is very important to develop staff as a team. No matter what job we do, we all contribute to the success of students; that helps morale and it helps people think positively. Certainly when Leicester won the title of University of the Year in 1989, the buzz that it gave staff around the campus was terrific. I emphasised how the team had delivered in gaining that award. It is important in making sure morale is very positive; it also means that when you have large challenges to meet the team swings into action again.

How did you become interested in counselling?

When I went to Leicester the university had traditionally offered counselling courses through the adult education department and there was a debate about whether these should continue. My view was that they were vocationally relevant, distinctive to the university and had been very successful. In that sense, just as we needed to continue with adult education, now the institute of lifelong learning, within that, counselling had a role to play. Then we decided that we needed a professor to lead the programme. Sue Wheeler was appointed and she took the courses to new levels in terms of student registrations. The kinds of courses we were offering really generated a huge

interest. One day she appeared in my office and said that one of the things that her professional association did was to have vice presidents and she would like to suggest that I became VP.

Have you seen any changes in the mental health and wellbeing of students?

It is inevitable that in any community of any scale you are going to find people with mental health problems of some kind. If you take Leicester, we have 23,000 students and 3,800 staff. A community of that size is equivalent to a small town. It means that we have to put in place good welfare support, good student counselling and a good staff counselling service. We also have an occupational health programme. All of those collectively help students to complete their courses. We do have a good record of student completion – 93 per cent – which puts us in the top 10 of universities in the UK for student completion. Having staff counselling/occupational health helps people overcome challenges in their work and other factors that impinge on their working lives. It also helps people return to work after a period away.

How would you say your counselling service supports the institution?

The counselling service consists of professionals who are there to help, including the academic staff, who try to deal with students and their problems. One of the judgements to be made is when is it no longer sufficient for a personal tutor to handle an issue. It is important to have a professional counsellor giving support and guidance. In respect of staff, it is equally important to have those services. One of the things that has changed in Leicester is

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the sheer demand on the counselling service – each time you expand the service there is still a huge demand!

What do you attribute that to?

Firstly, people come up against problems that you really do not feel they can handle on their own, and the counselling service is there to provide that service. Secondly, there used to be a wider group of professionals, whether doctors, clergy or solicitors and others, who might have been offering informal advice but have now been professionalised. Also, part of the language that is used has challenged some of the stigma associated with the area. For example, if you say to people this is a mental health problem, there is still a stigma attached; if you talk about counselling support, it focuses on the positive – that means people are willing to engage.

So the taboo is becoming less in institutions that have successfully made counselling an integrated part of their activity?

Yes. There are also certain times of the year which students find particularly challenging and when more visit the counselling service; for example, examination periods. Another time that counselling service numbers tend to rise is when students reading for master's programmes write their dissertation over the summer and have the challenge of having to do that independent piece of work. I am also told by my counselling service that international students sometimes find that even more of a challenge than some of the students who attended university in the UK for a first degree; it is just a different culture of working.

How can FE colleges be supported so that FE students can reach their academic and personal potential? We are finding a large numbers of counselling services cut in their entirety; how might that impact on students in terms of your university, as you said your services help retain students and maximise their potential?

One of the things we developed in Leicester back in 2001 was a colleges and university network. We, as the HE institution, work together with 21 FE and sixth-form colleges on curriculum development and a range of issues. There is no reason why different colleges could not come together to make provision in the field of counselling – that would be a way forward. We need to think of different ways of working to bring about flexibility to get situations to work.

Do you have any advice for other VCs in caring for the mental health and wellbeing of students and staff?

All Vice Chancellors think about how to enhance the student experience and this includes times when students confront difficulty; in that sense counselling services are really important as part of the support system in the university and in relation to the welfare network of student services generally.

How do you anticipate the future for universities? The press says there is not a future, that students will not want to come, degrees are useless, and worth less than they were 10 years ago.

We need to turn it round and communicate how good university can be, how it can develop potential and that we need universities because they engage in fundamental and applied research relevant to the population at large – medicine is a good example. We also need to think about how important universities are to economic development and in the transmission of culture. Universities have a very bright future and a major contribution to make. It is our role to make sure that we continue to communicate the message and persuade governments that universities need to be strongly supported, and students that they are thriving places that can change their lives. ■

Ruth Caleb, AUCC Past Chair



Some of the sites of Cornwall College