

Bob Fonow, June 4, 2007

UWL Retains It Prominent Position in the University League Tables!

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After a respite of several years, silently and patiently waiting for promised improvements, I am moved to comment on the Guardian university tables 2008 where the University of Wales, Lampeter has assumed again its now traditional and supine position as last in rank among the established universities and colleges of Great Britain.

It is only saved from being numerically last by the inclusion of a few even lower ranking colleges of further education further down the list. This must be a welcome mask for the failure of the sinecured, tenured and unaccountable administrative and professional staff so comfortably established in the beautiful environs of the diminished and once respected college.

The University of Wales, Lampeter has taken upon itself the vestiges of mediocrity, finding its calling not in academia, but in training courses, the manipulation of research ratings by front loading the theology department, and the occasional picturesque picnic on the lawn for town and gown food tasters. It satisfies itself by self congratulation for keeping up student numbers while the number and quality of academic departments annually declines.

Some of you might remember when a Lampeter degree was an entre into a respected profession, or highly regarded graduate program. It was a degree from a college with a history (and a History Department). At one time, just a few years ago, it was an advantage to cite Lampeter on a resume, instead of hiding it, as many now do, by only describing oneself as a degreed member of the University of Wales, hoping an employer might think the applicant a graduate of Cardiff or Aberystwyth.

Recently, I had the pleasure of visiting the College for the annual 16 Club Returner's Dinner in early June 2007. Thirty people this year - an equal number of College members and Returners enjoying a delightful meal and one of the best Jokemaster contests in recent years. Within two hours of arriving on the lawns in the early afternoon for croquet and barbecue the following was reported without prompting:

A Theology and Religious Studies department growing like a malignant tumor at the expense of a balanced curriculum.

No courses in modern history (I hope this is an exaggeration). The Classics Department following History into decline.

No priest on staff in the Chapel that is the essence of the College's initial foundation.

The hockey pitch condemned – the clubs having to remove themselves to Carmarthen for games. The tennis courts still a parking lot. Sports a general shambles.

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The description of embarrassingly juvenile Ugandan shenanigans in the fiscal offices of Old Building. Please, St. David, let this be an unsubstantiated rumour.

An architectural horror next to the library - stunning in its banality and lack of regard for the aesthetics of its surroundings. Presumably designed by someone in the Theology department as a visual abstraction of post-modern hell in the 21st century.

Academic staff psychologically distressed, ill and demoralized.

Complaints of absent or invisible leadership.

Kiddie-porn and UWL in the same Cambrian News headlines. An old friend sadly disgraced, a failure for us all, but not the only such case in the last few years in UWL?

The 16 Club speaks among themselves of SDUC, the old College, referred to as a symbol of authenticity and sense of obligation to those who came before, a College responsible to the sum total of its graduates, each of whom claims the crown of earning their degrees and distinctions, and demanding from their efforts an increase in their investment, rather than the current state of intellectual and moral bankruptcy, and the flaccid and impotent acceptance of being last. The 16 Club is the only such group left, after the disenfranchisement of the Lampeter Society by an administrative coup several years ago, but they are by no means alone among the vibrant individuals I met this weekend within the community of the College. We need outspoken men and women who will speak to power and strip it of its complacency and phony veneer.

Serving as a diplomat for this year in Baghdad I am familiar with mediocrity and its results. I am unhappily familiar with institutions that do not hold executives accountable for poor performance, or set the barrier for success so low as to be meaningless. Of course, one can't compare Lampeter to Baghdad. Professors are shot in the head on their way to class at Iraqi universities, students are bombed into small pieces several times a year. Still, they are so eager to teach or receive a university education that that they are willing to take these risks. Witnessing this makes me resent the stupefaction and self-satisfaction of Lampeter's administration even more. ¹

This brings me to the recent letter to the 16 Club from Richard Jopling, a Club founder, and person with a more charitable disposition towards Lampeter's management than myself. Observing that Lampeter is coming up to 200 years as an important British educational institution, Jopling, a successful university administrator, argues that the College urgently requires a reevaluation of its mission and reason for existence. On the face of the evidence who can dispute this? ²

There is a necessary place for such a unique institution as Lampeter in the world today, one which is based on the values that suffused it over one and a half centuries, but which have yet to be at UWL integrated effectively into a modern and sustainable organization capable of meeting the needs of its students and graduate membership.

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I hope these issues can be discussed at the 70th anniversary of the Lampeter Society in July.

Very best wishes,

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¹ For a description of life in an Iraqi university see the following NY Times article:
<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/06/05/world/middleeast/05college.html?hp>

² Mr. Jopling's letter can be found on the 16 Club Returners website (www.the-16-club.fsnet.co.uk)