

# **The Failure of Lampeter**

July 14, 2004

**To: The University of Wales, Lampeter Community**

**From: Robert C. Fonow, BA (Hons.), MSc. (Econ.)**

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Twenty five years ago I graduated from Lampeter with a degree that was admired and valued. On the strength of it I won a bursary to study at the London School of Economics, and from there went on to build a career as a management troubleshooter and consultant in several countries.

Imagine my disappointment to learn recently that in 2004 the Guardian newspaper ranks Lampeter dead last in the university rankings in the United Kingdom. Dead last. 119 of 119.

I visit Lampeter two or three times a year, often to research and write management reports for the distressed organizations that hire me. I've been aware of the problems, and have watched with dismay as management failure, drift and poor strategic planning have led to the current desperate situation. Occasionally I have offered advice, with deference to the administrations in charge, which was always rejected.

I'm no longer respectful or careful. Last doesn't deserve respect. It requires corrective action. A degree from the worst university in the UK is not an asset. It's an embarrassment. Imagine the value of a Lampeter degree to recently graduated students competing for their first jobs. Or consider the frustration of someone five or ten years after graduation, who expected that their Lampeter degree would be a lifelong contribution to their career.

We will hear from the Lampeter administration that other newspapers and magazines rate Lampeter a bit higher, or that rankings don't mean much, or that they are unfair. But the Guardian is the favorite newspaper of teachers, the very people with the most influence over those choosing their universities. And a little bit higher in the The Times is just accepting a little less worst.

So, from today I'm approaching the Lampeter problem as a management troubleshooter – as if Lampeter is one of my clients. I hope that this letter, posted on the Lampeter 16 Club Returner's website, will be read by everyone interested in Lampeter's predicament

and leads to the necessary improvements in the College's administration and organization.

The key lesson I've learned in dealing with distressed organizations is that the problems invariably start at the top, with the top executives and boards of directors. They start with intellectual arrogance, a sense that only the top man knows what's right, a disdain for opposing ideas, self-aggrandizement, poor internal communications, psychological intimidation and insularity to outside influence. This describes my experience dealing with Lampeter in the last few years. It always results in an organization that has lost its mission and institutional purpose.

A new vice chancellor, Robert Pearce, has been in place for over a year. He inherited a dysfunctional institution. He is cordial, a long term thinker, more communicative and consultative than the last vice chancellor, but, in my opinion, he's not moving fast enough to make the changes that are necessary for the short and mid term survival of the College. Lampeter is in crisis and should be treated like it. Outlined below are several recommendations based on my work experience and long observation of UWL.

## **1. Management**

The Lampeter Council should separate the business management of the College from the academic management. There is no commercial or fiscal logic in investing all management responsibilities in the top academic position. This should have been done ten years ago.

The Vice Chancellor should be the top academic officer, responsible for strategy, curriculum and staff development, making sure that the academic departments are first rate and that the degree programs are relevant and attract good students. The current curricula and degree structure at Lampeter is an organizational nightmare. It tries to accomplish far too much with too few resources. The current structure guarantees poor performance across all departments. Repairing this alone is a full time job.

The Vice Chancellor, or perhaps Principal, the more appropriately-sized historic title of the Lampeter academic leader, should retain the important ceremonial duties of the College. But he or she should not have ultimate executive authority without checks and balances.

The business affairs of the College should reside with a professional Managing Director in charge of finance, marketing and recruitment, fundraising, buildings and grounds, athletics, community affairs, local government relations, catering, etc. The Managing Director should have a reporting line into both the Principal and the Lampeter Council. The role of the MD should be to assure fiscal and operational discipline. As a consequence of this reorganization the Pro-Vice Chancellor and Dean positions should be eliminated. There may need to be redundancies, contract renegotiations or retirements at high levels, for example academics no longer in functioning departments, to pay for the

MD position. This should be done with compassion and concern for the well-being of those affected, but the decision should be taken swiftly and persistently executed.

On my most recent visit to Lampeter in early June there was a lack of urgency, a very slow management tempo, and the facilities were in deplorable condition. The first thing a business leader should do is light a fire under the functional middle managers. My experience with these people on several projects over the last five years is that they are inefficient, often untrained for their duties, uncoordinated, and slow. They don't seem to operate according to goals or plans. The marketing management is unresponsive or unable to respond optimally under the current organizational structure. The administration takes months to make commercial decisions, the buildings and grounds are a mess, catering is in a flux and apparently not even available at times, athletics are in desperate condition, and students sometimes wait weeks for papers to be graded – a general sign of staff demoralization and management malaise.

The role of management is to get things done according to a disciplined plan of action. This means setting goals and targets and following up to make sure people are meeting their functional responsibilities, and if they aren't, reassigning or removing them. The academic leadership and business leadership require different skills and emphases.

Each of these two leadership posts should be earned on two year contracts. The first year should always be a probationary year. This might change after several years of successful performance, but a short term contract is optimal now, so that underperforming executives can be replaced quickly and without burdensome process. .

If the current Lampeter Council isn't capable of taking this direct and necessary action they should resign. The Council is just as responsible for Lampeter's predicament as the Administration. We don't need a Council of retired luminaries or gentlemen farmers – unless they are really committed in terms of time and effort to changing Lampeter for the better. A congenial lunch every six months in the private dining room rubber stamping decisions in which they were not intimately involved doesn't cut it. We need people with recent business, fundraising and academic marketing experience on the Council – and these people should understand Lampeter's unique requirements. .

## **2. Recruitment**

Every higher education institution in the United Kingdom must learn to survive by competing in the marketplace for fee paying students. But who wants to come to the worst university in the country, other than the growing numbers of Chinese students needing language lessons before going on to other universities for their degrees, the dullards of wealthy families who can buy a degree, and those who can't get in anywhere else? That's what being last means. Choices become increasingly limited. Today Lampeter is forced to accept anyone who can bring in a few quid to fund operations. Fortunately, we still have many students who come to Lampeter on the basis of its older reputation. They deserve better.

What are we marketing at Lampeter? The key marketing message is that Lampeter is an historic small university college with an illustrious past and vibrant future. Lampeter graduates are educated to be ethically responsible citizens, prepared to make a contribution to the improvement of society. Lampeter graduates are found in the highest reaches of government, business and the professions around the world. The college is steeped in its history, which encompasses a disciplined approach to degree studies in an open academic and lively social environment. We are a secular institution today but proud of our historic connection to the Church, which still influences the spirit of Lampeter, where all can feel accepted and comfortable regardless of race, religion, politics, sex or eccentricities. In a complex and confusing world Lampeter offers an excellent liberal arts education and a path toward values that will help students contribute to the world around them effectively and morally – while making a good living. You are a Lampeter man or woman for life – part of something historic and special, available only to the very few.

Lampeter is much more than a bucolic pasture in West Wales that is safe for introverts, mature students and the Green Party. Somehow, subsidiary and indeed quite attractive features of Lampeter have become the main marketing message. We need to get back to basics.

There are many models for a successful liberal arts college in a globally competitive academic market. Lampeter has so many inherent advantages one can only conclude that there has been a complete failure of marketing imagination and effectiveness. Over the years there have been several good marketing programs with attractive brochures, a sophisticated website, and good publicity. But the programs lack consistency and don't build on earlier successes. The current web-site is sadly not up to previous standards.

A few thoughts on rankings:

For three years I've been trying to get Lampeter's administration to lobby for a change in the Guardian and Times ranking system. It doesn't make any sense to measure Lampeter against Lancaster, Oxford, Bristol, or Cardiff. They are large universities, not a college like Lampeter that specializes in the liberal arts. It would be fair to everyone to have the rankings split into two categories, one for universities and one for specialized institutions. Based on its history, Lampeter should be near the top in the specialized category. Recruitment of good students would be easier. In fact, my goal would be to have Lampeter in the top five specialized colleges and make students compete for a place again, like they used to when I was a student. .

Marketing is ultimately about feel - like a good golf or tennis swing. The talented get better at it with practice, the mediocre never quite master the technique. And very often the simplest changes result in the most improvements. The marketing team at Lampeter needs a good Managing Director coach and several years of consistent performance.

### 3. The Curriculum

The current degree structure is too complicated, diffused and becoming meaningless. There are virtually hundreds of degree options at Lampeter. It is only a mild stretch to suggest that one could earn a Combined Joint Honours Degree in “Early-Medieval Monastic Butterfly Farming in the Teifi Valley and the Freudian Dispositions of Middle-Aged Female Writers in Scarborough 1961-1972”, learning Chinese in the process. The administrative overhead of such a structure adds cost to the College’s operations and confuses the Lampeter value proposition.

The curriculum should be defined by the mission, which in turn defines long term strategy and operations tactics. For Lampeter to survive and thrive, its curriculum must be consistent with its institutional history.

Since its foundation over 175 years ago, Lampeter’s mission has been to produce small numbers of ethically responsible graduates to populate Britain’s important national institutions and businesses. It did this with a powerful and simple curriculum: History, English, Welsh, Theology, Classics. Strong subjects with meaning and substance, not watered down weak-kneed sociological constructions like Victorian Studies, Welsh Studies, Business Studies, or even Religion and Ethics in Western Thought – valuable to study and within Lampeter’s competence but a reconstituted Theology or History degree nonetheless.

Lampeter must return to these core subjects and concentrate its financial and academic resources into making them the very best programs in Great Britain. This is the only way that Lampeter can rebuild its reputation quickly and attract fee paying students in the near future. And it will lower marketing and operations costs. The statement “I have a degree in History, Welsh, Archeology, Theology from Lampeter” has to mean something again, and be worth a significant financial investment.

Lampeter doesn’t have the resources to offer Business, Computer Science or Information Technology degrees. To offer them forces Lampeter to compete against larger universities and former polytechnics with superior technical resources. Lampeter can never be near the top in these subjects. However, these are valuable support subjects to modern History, English, Theology, etc. degree programs. The current level of funding for these subjects is sufficient for a support mission. One might also consider having every Part One student take a foundation course in Business and Computer Studies so they are familiar with the efficiencies that computers and the Internet bring to academic study, and also to assure that Lampeter students are familiar with the general trends in economic life around them.

Finally, the intention to offer a degree in Chinese language or “Chinese Studies” at Lampeter is an ill-advised diversion of resources. I’ve worked in China for many years and I’m writing part of this letter in Beijing. I’ve studied the country and struggled with the Chinese language. I don’t believe that Lampeter can offer a degree in Chinese with

one or two teachers. There can be courses in Chinese history, literature, religion, etc. under the appropriate academic departments. Focus. Focus. Focus.

Languages at Lampeter are support subjects for those who need specific training for their degrees, Arabic for an Islamic component in a Theology degree, Greek and Latin for Classics. I have no problem with a course in Chinese language since there are so many Chinese students at Lampeter who could be language training assistants. But Chinese students are there to learn English or study their subjects in English, not teach Chinese. And who would fund their teaching? Lampeter has slender financial resources.

### **3. Alumni and Fundraising.**

For ten years I have urged Lampeter's administration and leading Council members to start a fundraising campaign. Each time I'm met with a blank stare, as if this is something entirely alien to the United Kingdom and a rather tawdry idea from the United States. In early June 2004 I was told again that this is something that will be looked at, maybe as early as next year. Or maybe the year after that?

Today UK students and their parents have to assume a greater share of the costs of their education. They will be discriminating customers. Lampeter will surely fail and close without its own source of supplemental funding. Money means management flexibility, the capability to hire the best staff, expand the library, provide financial aid to those in need, or supplemental scholarships to attract the very best potential students. It means facilities in a good state of repair, instead of using one of the two tennis courts as a parking lot. It means better catering and helping the Student's Union bring first class entertainment to Lampeter. It means repairing a sports hall that is filthy and unfit for human habitation. It means reviving a dormant coach-less sports program that once produced winning field hockey, football and cricket teams and a rugby team that was respected and admired. It means repairing dorms that are in poor repair, or funding the superb Lampeter choir and theatre groups. It means being able to afford to cut all the grass, even behind buildings that can't be seen from the street and walkways. It means having printed prayer cards in the chapel instead of a single crumpled photocopy saying please don't take it, this is the last one. Lampeter needs money whether it likes it or not. And clearly the Council needs to have a good look around the next time it convenes.

We have several thousand graduates who are possible contributors. In 25 years I haven't had one letter or communication from the college asking for a contribution. The LSE sends me a newsletter every other month and a fundraising letter twice a year, every year. We need state funding for the basics but a fundraising program can help make Lampeter a much better place to live for three years.

If the administration lacks resources, they should delegate fundraising to alumni with business, marketing and fundraising experience.

But that presupposes that there is an alumni program. Unfortunately a recent vice chancellor found the Lampeter Society's concern about the College's continuing degradation a bit too bothersome, and had the alumni group disenfranchised from its charter as a member of the governing body. Fifteen years ago the annual Lampeter Society weekend was attended by 300 graduates and their families. Fewer attend today. The events have lost their élan because most alumni are disengaged from Lampeter despite the heroic and unacknowledged work of the dedicated Lampeter Society leadership.

There are signs of change. This year the alumni coordination office helped arrange for the college printing shop to print the Lampeter Society "Link", instead of the alumni paying a commercial printer. This is a nice gesture, gratefully received, but even the coordinator would have to admit that it's hardly a breakthrough in alumni relations. Much more work is required. Without exception, every university and college with a sound financial and academic foundation has an alumni program that is functionally integrated into its long term planning.

One must question the management priorities of a council and administration that continuously delays implementing a fundraising program and neglects the alumni most responsible for its success. This could be rectified quickly by the Lampeter Council mandating a viable fundraising and alumni program, and requesting the formation and cooperation of a team of experienced Lampeter graduates to write a fundraising business plan and get it underway. This failure to do this up to now is further evidence that the business and academic leadership roles need to be separated. Checks and balances.

These steps and many others are required to fix Lampeter and reestablish its reputation on a sound foundation. For this to happen, virtually every Lampeter constituency will need to be involved: alumni, administration, academic staff, students, townspeople, the University of Wales, Welsh government and Whitehall education officials. The ideas above will not be welcome by everyone. Many will fight back to secure their comfortable Lampeter sinecures. It will be a tough couple of years if the Council, Administration and other relevant authorities and parties have the guts for the necessary actions. But it's the opinion of many people with knowledge of Lampeter's affairs that there are no alternatives to major corrective action – starting now.

In my experience we can expect to see renewed energy and vitality in college affairs within two to three months of vigorously implementing these recommendations. More emphasis will be placed on students and their interests. The administration will begin to function smoothly and efficiently. With an appropriate marketing and publicity program we can expect to see the ranking of Lampeter rise dramatically, perhaps as early as 2005 but certainly by 2006. Lampeter will return to its historical role as a respected small university college with a valued degree – proudly available only to the very few.

Sincerely,

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