

Open ethics – a call for university commitment to ethical partnerships

A staff group at the Open University is proposing an ethical strategy for the development of external partnerships, which would include a severing of the institution's links with the arms industry.

Funding crisis

The Open University (OU), the UK's largest provider of part-time distance higher education, faces big cuts over the next three years due to the implementation of the government's Equivalent and Lower Qualification (ELQ) policy.

In response, OU management is expanding income-generating activities from external partnerships and exploring the feasibility of international expansion. Some staff however fear this response is unfocussed and in danger of damaging the university's long-established commitment to social justice.

The Metrix connection

Such fears have been fuelled by the university's involvement in the Metrix consortium, which has been established to win the government contract to part-privatise all military training in the UK. The contract is the largest private finance initiative seen in Britain, valued at £10-12 billion.

But the consortium involves the OU partnering Metrix members such as missile manufacturer, Raytheon and Qinetiq, the military research company that was controversially privatised out of the Ministry of Defence's R&D labs.

Staff concerns about such links have been further heightened by the lack of information regarding the role that the OU is playing within the Metrix consortium. This is seen as indicative of the secrecy that surrounds military projects, at the expense of academic openness.

Alternative strategy

But rather than just campaigning against such partnerships, a staff group at the OU has been set up to be pro-active in proposing an alternative.

A spokesperson for the group said, "Rather than dealing with external partnerships on a 'scatter gun' basis, making links opportunistically, we felt the OU needed a focused approach. After all, like many universities, the OU has spent a great deal on re-branding. Yet effective branding demands conscious choices about which 'partnerships' to seek out and which to avoid. That is the

essence of both organisational strategy and effective marketing. We couldn't, and still can't, see any coherent and considered approach to partnerships from the university's management that fits in with a 'high quality, social justice' brand. Instead, it seems to be based on a 'let's get in with the big corporations' approach. There don't seem to be too many social justice aspects to that."

Model strategy

The group consequently put forward an 'ethical partnership strategy' but rather than re-invent the wheel, they decided a successful model already existed — that used by the Co-operative Bank.

A report by War On Want had already pointed out that the Co-op Bank was the only high street bank to have a written ethical lending policy *and* to have implemented it in practice. This includes a refusal to invest in companies that "manufacture and/or sell systems or products that kill, maim or destroy". The policy has proved commercially very successful for the bank.

The OU staff group adopted the Co-op Bank policy and set out the ethical partnership guidelines that the university could adopt regarding the arms trade, animal welfare, ecological awareness, human rights and corporate responsibility. They used it as the basis of a report to management, via the University and College Union branch.

Initially, the then Vice Chancellor appeared to recognise the need for an 'ethical partnership framework' but no definite proposals have been forthcoming from OU management as to what this framework might mean.

With the recent appointment of a new VC, Martin Bean (formerly of the educational wing of Microsoft) the staff group now hope management will take a fresh look at the approach they advocate.

"There are signs that the new VC is bringing a breath of fresh air into the Open University" said the staff group spokesperson, "and he has already spoken on several occasions about the university's commitment to social justice. Now we'd like to see our ethical partnership approach explored as part of that commitment".

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Letters

Letters to the editor should be sent to <newsletter@sgr.org.uk>. It is recommended that they should not be longer than 250 words. They may be edited for brevity or clarity.

Low energy debate

In addition to the low carbon energy debate (SGR newsletter, 37), I feel there needs to be a low energy debate because without addressing the fundamental fact that nothing can completely replace the fossil fuels, and in particular oil, for the energy and raw materials they provide, we will not design a system fit for the future.

Nick Reeves rightly points out that everything we do alters the environment and thanks to hundreds of years of 'progress', we now face a perfect storm of climate change, resource depletion, loss of biodiversity, soil erosion, lack of fresh water and population growth. Despite the continued melting of ice sheets and other climatic evidence, arguments still rage not just over whether global warming is caused by human activity, but whether it is happening at all! If we cannot agree on what the problem is, how can we ever hope to agree on the solution?

If we compare the talk to the action, we see governments bailing out banks but being unable to invest in real energy efficiency improvements, such as insulation for all. We see faith being put in electric cars or biofuels but no moves to reduce travel. Oil allowed globalisation but there is no debate about how a global system could function without oil. And if we don't make that transition, it will be imposed on us by nature.

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