



**DON'T DO IT:
KEEP STUDENT
FACING SERVICES
IN DEPARTMENTS**

DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA, COMMUNICATIONS AND CULTURAL STUDIES

STAFF VIEWS ON THE PROPOSED CENTRALISATION OF STUDENT-FACING SERVICES “BLUEPRINT” 16. 09. 2021

Media, Communications and Cultural Studies is a very large Department with more than 1200 students. The Department works across many different fields of theory and practice in complex ways and is world-leading in its academic research and creative output.

Below are responses from staff to the proposed centralisation of student-facing services. They request that this information is treated with respect and confidentiality.

PROFESSOR NATALIE FENTON
FORMER HEAD OF DEPARTMENT, FORMER DIRECTOR
OF RESEARCH, CURRENT REF PANEL MEMBER

The Department of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies is one of the largest in the College and makes a decisive contribution to Goldsmiths finances. Rated 12th in the world in the latest QS rankings and 19th in the UK in the Guardian rankings, coming 3rd in the country in REF2014 and 1st for research intensity, the Department has a significant domestic and international reputation that underpins its international recruitment in particular (that accounts for circa 35% of our students). As a senior member of staff who has twice been Head of Department, Director of Research for 5 years and now acting as a member of REF Subpanel 34, I have no doubt that the evisceration of our Departmental office to be replaced by central services will be hugely detrimental to students' learning and experience and to the ability of staff to do internationally outstanding research.

MCCS is a complex Department with 6 undergraduate degree programmes, 26 MA programmes and a large PhD programme. The complexities of our Department are increased due to the large number of practice areas we cover: TV, film, photography, animation, illustration, journalism, radio, scriptwriting, fiction and interactive media – requiring expert technical support and facilities. In October 2020 we had 1266 students enrolled. Our Departmental office enables the smooth running of a complex multi-dimensional department. Our office staff understand the precise needs of each programme, each practice area and each module within each programme. They know how each discrete element fits into the whole and the regulations that map onto them. They know each staff member and who is responsible for what within the Department. They can respond immediately and accurately to all student (and staff) needs; they solve complex student problems on the spot and help avoid growing student complaints. They are a crucial part of the community and identity building within an otherwise large and confusing department.

A vastly diminished departmental office replaced by centralised services will inevitably lead to more administrative work for academic staff who are already working an average 60 hour week, and less student satisfaction. Even now, we do not have enough staff to cover the key administrative functions

of the Department. More administrative work will mean much less research time that will directly impact our next REF submission that will inevitably fall. A weakened REF submission will not only mean less by way of QR funding but crucially it will pull us down the international league tables that are so important for international student recruitment.

Not only will it weaken our research capabilities but it will greatly weaken our ability to offer pastoral care at a moment when student mental ill-health is a major concern. It will damage our own ability to be innovative and respond to new trends and teach new and cutting-edge subjects that have made us world-leading. It will scupper the possibility of doing any effective outreach, widening participation or additional recruitment work because we simply won't have time. It will stymie our ability to take our work to the world outside, generate social and political change and do impact and engagement activities (that count for 25% of the REF evaluation).

More administrative burden on academic staff will also lead to worse teaching. Good teaching and good quality assessment and feedback requires time that will be taken up with filling in registers, chasing absent students, recruiting and appointing associate lecturers etc. Staff morale will plummet and the recruitment of new staff will suffer. Student satisfaction levels will also decrease further.

In sum, a cost-cutting exercise in the short-term could end up devastating a core Goldsmiths Department in the long-term.

PROFESSOR NATALIE FENTON

FORMER HEAD OF DEPARTMENT, FORMER DIRECTOR OF RESEARCH, REF PANEL MEMBER, DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA, COMMUNICATIONS AND CULTURAL STUDIES

PROFESSOR JAMES CURRAN

A big and diverse Department such as MCCS can feel anonymous and impersonal. The administrative staff is central in making it seem more intimate and accessible. They make student's lives so much better, and their on-the-spot knowledge makes the department work so much more efficiently.

Centralisation will doubtless enable savings. But Goldsmiths will pay the price in terms of deteriorating student satisfaction, with an adverse effect on recruitment.

This is such a mistake. Please think again before going for across-the-board centralisation.

PROFESSOR JAMES CURRAN
*PROFESSOR OF COMMUNICATIONS, DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA,
COMMUNICATIONS AND CULTURAL STUDIES*

BECKY GARDINER
SENIOR LECTURER, CONVENOR MA JOURNALISM

I would like to register my deep concern about the proposed restructuring of the professional staff roles, and in particular their centralisation. As MAJ convenor, I cannot imagine having to deal with a centralised admin team - the MA programme is small and complicated practice programme, and having a team who know how it is structured makes it possible to ensure it runs smoothly.

To give two small examples - the marking packs for our modules are often complicated, with lots of different elements carrying a proportion of the final grade. Our office knows this, and can create them quickly and efficiently. The same goes with our AL admin - we have a lot of ALs who are expert practitioners - it is one of the strengths of the programme, that is always remarked upon by our accreditation body and our external examiners. Some of these might only teach one session, and so the paperwork involved is fiddly. Again, our staff are on top of this because they understand the way the programme works.

But I am also concerned for our students, particularly the ones who struggle most. Over the past few weeks I have, with the help of the office staff, helped three 3rd year students who were about to fail their degree navigate the best course of action for them going forward, and have supported several more through late summer resits - again with lots of support from the office.

These students are vulnerable - they are struggling with illness and disability, mental health issues, and bereavement - and if they had had to deal with a faceless office rather than human beings who know who they are, and who are known to them, I genuinely think some of them would have fallen through the net. The divide between admin and pastoral support is sometimes wafer thin, and our office staff understand that.

BECKY GARDINER
*SENIOR LECTURER, DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA,
COMMUNICATIONS AND CULTURAL STUDIES*

TASSIA KOBYLINSKA
SENIOR TUTOR, CONVENOR AND LECTURER

As senior tutor for the BA Media and Communications, I would like to express my utter dismay at the proposed restructuring of the professional staff administrative and coordination staff roles. Our Admin office is the beating heart of our department - they are always there to answer questions and give advice, and the relationships we build as academics with administrative roles such as mine, are the lifeblood!

I have been in this role for 4 years now and I so value the support, knowledge, and expertise of our team - from assessment and extenuating circumstances to regulatory issues. They are patient and supportive and always available to answer any questions I have. It is one of the great pleasures of the work, having a collegiate and collaborative UG admin team who know the department inside out.

Also critically, the personal touch they have with students is immeasurably important in the context of pastoral care and my role as senior tutor. Students who are referred to me in crisis, often come through the UG administrative team, who have always been supportive to these students, offering a personal and human touch in the face of challenging procedures and regulations; they are kind.

This makes an incredible difference to the students' well-being in times of crisis. And particularly so during the pandemic when they have been stretched to the limit. I am so worried about the impact to our students, and our Department, if they are removed. We will lose the very heart of MCCS, and our own administrative workload will increase, becoming impossible to balance with teaching and researching as required in our roles.

TASSIA KOBYLINSKA
*CONVENOR & LECTURER TV PRACTICE, SENIOR TUTOR BA
MEDIA & COMMUNICATIONS, DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA,
COMMUNICATIONS AND CULTURAL STUDIES*

PROFESSOR TONY DOWMUNT (EMERITUS) FORMER CONVENOR, SCREEN DOCUMENTARY

I'm very keen to support my colleagues' campaign against the Professional Services blueprint restructure. I ran the MA in Screen Documentary for 20 years up to 2016 and would have found this task almost impossible without the help of all the support staff, who were always on hand to in relation the complex administration tasks that surrounded recruitment, room allocation, student induction, and Exam deadlines and Boards. Having people to help within the Department who were easily accessible - personally and geographically, made the job so much easier, and my performance so much more efficient.

I have also particularly enjoyed the support of the Departmental Finance Administration staff both in the research aspects of my role in the past, and since becoming an Emeritus with my current research projects. They were always a significant source of expert support in relation to dealing with the often opaque rules and regulations operated by the centralised Finance and HR Departments.

TONY DOWMUNT

*EMERITUS PROFESSOR, DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA,
COMMUNICATIONS AND CULTURAL STUDIES*

DR MARINA VISHMIDT **CONVENOR AND LECTURER, MA CULTURAL INDUSTRY**

I am writing to register my strong objections to the proposals to centralise administration at Goldsmiths, whether this is done by providing a central 'information hub' for the entire university, by School or by degree level.

I have been employed in the Department of Media, Communications and Cultural Studies since 2017. In common with many fellow staff who have provided detailed insight in this point, I would strongly emphasise how a Department of our size, complexity and versatility would not function for a minute without our talented and tireless administrative colleagues, much less attain the levels of student recruitment, satisfaction and career progress that we regularly do.

In order for this to happen, we need to have thorough and specialised knowledge, of the kind that is held both by academics and by professional services colleagues. Whether it's intimate familiarity of the workings of the Department's many unique programmes or the world-leading research and practice that informs its teaching and its outreach, it is a cohesive package.

In the difficult circumstances Goldsmiths is currently undergoing, no less than the health crisis that all universities are dealing with, it would be an act of sheer wreckage to remove the administrative backbone of a large and specialised Department such as ours which enables us to uphold our pastoral no less than our pedagogical duties to the UG, PG and PhD students that are increasingly choosing our Department from the numerous - and global - media and cultural studies programmes available to them.

None of us, regardless of whether we are part time, full time, visiting, associate or permanent, can do our jobs without the available support of our administrative colleagues. Their working conditions are our working conditions, just as their working conditions are a real part of our students' learning conditions. If their roles are eliminated, you will have terrible teaching and research as well as terrible admin, because make no mistake, a centralised system only means that academic staff are doing the admin work without the time or experience. This is evident from every single institution that has taken this route (many of which have since returned to having Departmental admin teams) and it is reckless in the extreme to imagine the outcome will be any different here: an institution which is already navigating a rocky path for a number of reasons, none of which have to do with our Department admin team but all of which will be cruelly exacerbated by their absence.

DR. MARINA VISHMIDT

*PROGRAMME CONVENOR AND LECTURER, MA CULTURAL INDUSTRY,
DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA, COMMUNICATIONS AND CULTURAL STUDIES*

DR JAMES BURTON

SENIOR LECTURER

The proposed restructure and centralisation of student-facing professional services seems to be built upon a fundamental misunderstanding of the role and function of administrative and other professional staff within a department (at least, one like MCCS). It seems to see them collectively as a kind of tool that can be replaced by another, perhaps more efficient tool, while the essential core of the department remains broadly the same. This is completely wrong-headed.

The professional services staff are the heart and fabric of the department. Their day-to-day-roles do not consist in simply knowing and passing on information in the manner of the proposed “Information Hub”, but in understanding, making judgments, listening to students, designing and redesigning the systems we use to keep this Department running so successfully in the face of ever-growing pressures and restrictions. They are integral to every effort the department is trying to make towards improving the students’ sense of community. Changes that have hugely benefited students, such as our new personal tutor system, are collaborations between professional and academic staff, based on their understanding of different aspects of students’ needs. I was our departmental TEF lead in the TEF pilot two years ago. So many of the strengths we were able to cite in that document are dependent on the work of experienced and dedicated professional staff that it is inconceivable that we could have achieved our Silver rating without them.

A thousand daily problems are virtually invisible from the outside because a dedicated team of professional staff are continually working to avert, mitigate and compensate for them. This depends not on information processing, but on embedded knowledge, improvisation and problem-solving, fuelled by the commitment to students and colleagues that can only come from daily personal interactions. Remove this and suddenly these problems will all become visible. Some of them will turn into crises, undermining all our recent efforts to improve the student experience, and threatening to destabilise one of Goldsmiths’ biggest and most successful departments. It may be possible for Goldsmiths to have a Media and Cultural Studies Department without local professional staff, but certainly not a successful one, and very likely one that could not sustain itself long-term. By centralising, you are not making adjustments but ripping apart the department, and removing the cornerstone of everything we do well. Apart from anything else, it seems like an extraordinarily dangerous and self-defeating strategy for an institution that is already struggling.

*SENIOR LECTURER, CULTURAL STUDIES AND CULTURAL HISTORY,
DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA, COMMUNICATIONS AND CULTURAL STUDIES*

PROFESSOR MATTHEW FULLER **CHAIR OF RESEARCH COMMITTEE**

As former Chair of the MA Theory Committee in MCCS I am strongly opposed to the idea of removing our administrative team from the department. Our large number of postgraduate degrees relies on an informed and responsive team to maintain student satisfaction and to keep work processed fast and with attention to detail. This means that the administrative staff need to be informed about the specific needs of individual programmes and modules. Across this department these can be highly varied. They also need to spot any potential issues with particular students and work to resolve them. Academic staff work in close collaboration with professional colleagues and feel part of a joint team where there is a strong sense of mutual reliance based on experience.

As current Chair of our Research Committee, I am very worried about the impact the depletion of our administrative team will have on our ability to manage research in practical terms. Our research is intricately woven into our teaching and is also key to our recruitment since it is our research reputation, and the various rankings it sustains, that draws students to us. What seems like a cost-saving exercise actually threatens our ability to gain income.

The more administrative work is centralised and slowed down, made difficult by its unfamiliarity - because of inherent variation across departments and the kinds of programme they teach - the more it will be driven towards academic staff. This will inevitably mean that the college will both be paying academics to do work previously done by professional colleagues, academics will have less time to do research, and the already extended working week will continue to grow.

As Chair of the MCCS Research Committee I rely on informed professional staff being able to assist with grant applications, the maintenance of financial records and processes, for the efficient engagement with procedures and to be able to act on their own initiative based upon accumulated experience and good communication.

Professional services staff are core to the proper functioning of the university and should be highly valued.

By contrast, the clumsiness and inattentiveness of the present restructuring leads to an atmosphere of despair and cynicism that will take some time to remedy.

PROFESSOR MATTHEW FULLER
*CHAIR OF RESEARCH COMMITTEE, FORMER CHAIR OF THEORY,
DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA, COMMUNICATIONS AND CULTURAL STUDIES*

PROFESSOR SUE CLAYTON

I would consider our MCCS support staff very much in the way that a GP or hospital reception works. That is, they are a vital part of the service, public-facing, and expert at reading what is a real emergency that needs immediate action; when someone requires practical referral and to which services; or whether they simply need a friendly face and some reassurance (which, especially in these challenging times, might be the difference between a student staying or leaving a programme). By performing this function, in cost-effectiveness terms, they guarantee that other staff- technical, managerial, academic - do not waste hours of each day functioning as lesser-skilled administrators, but instead are able to efficiently carry out the roles and specialisms they are contracted to do.

Perhaps to central management the 'reception' role appears merely a PR one, but it belies these colleagues' hugely important knowledge of all the personnel and systems, and an appreciation of these from the client point of view.

Client-facing staff in roles like these have fast and accurate knowledge of every ongoing issue - from whether a member of teaching staff is suddenly off sick, and how to rapidly notify the relevant students; to why a particular lecture theatre is inexplicably locked with 200 people waiting to get in and how to get that resolved fast; to where can a guest lecturer get hold of a vital connecting cable; to advising a student what course units are compatible with what others in the timetable, and can they change mid-term, and which staff member must they ask for permission; to how to arrange a welcome event of 700 prospective newcomers to the Department to maximise our admissions performance: to organising induction for 1250 students each September; to liaising with other Departments' staff on timetabling all our joint programmes; to spotting a student with urgent pastoral needs and fast-tracking them to the correct support; to listing and contacting those who may be not attending because of difficulties, and following up what the cause may be I have listed here a tiny fraction of the way they function as the eyes and ears of the Department, and make swift referrals to the correct staff and processes. A role that a remote central team could not possibly achieve.

In the last 6 years I estimate that over 15 new software systems and procedures have been introduced for staff, with every task such as accessing one's payroll information, making room bookings, or claiming research expenses now less, not more, efficient, and taking up far more of our time. While I understand some of these new systems have reasons (e.g. providing heightened online

security), I cannot imagine how many more systems a new student will have to learn to use, and what they will have to navigate, if yet more college systems are 'remote'. Being sent to a website where none of the myriad listed options reflect one's question or problem, and all require complex validation and access processes, does not help the student, the staff who then have to deal with frustrated and dissatisfied students, or the institution as a whole.

Please reconsider this proposal. We recognise the need to cut costs and to streamline administration - staff can and will work with central administration to look for further efficiencies - but the plan to instead remove client-facing services is a serious barrier to us delivering 34 degree programmes efficiently, and will be massively unpopular with students at a time when their patience and tolerance has been stretched by the effects of Covid, and by drastic cuts to other student services. Thank you.

SUE CLAYTON, PROFESSOR OF FILM AND TELEVISION

DEPARTMENT OF MEDIA, COMMUNICATIONS AND CULTURAL STUDIES

SOME CONCLUSIONS

1 **IMPACT OF COVID WORKING CONDITIONS**

Academic and technical support staff last year faced the biggest change to University teaching in our lifetimes, when we struggled to deliver teaching both on and offline, and which for practice subjects was almost impossibly challenging. This was only achieved because of tireless co-ordination between academic, professional services and technical support staff at a micro-level. As all staff work together far beyond their designated hours, and under considerable personal stress themselves, we are facing the dismantling of the very structure that made such progress possible and which is still needed to underpin teaching, learning and student pastoral care in what remain fragile and difficult times. It would be hard to think of a worse time to undermine such a partnership, which we fear will disrupt vital infrastructure, fracture working relationships, damage student satisfaction and recruitment and render staff far less able to meet their teaching, research and pastoral responsibilities.

2 **STUDENT WELFARE AND MENTAL HEALTH**

Especially since the stresses of Covid, the need for students to have direct support from known individuals that they can contact face to face, is paramount if they are to flourish here at Goldsmiths. Without a fully functioning safety net, there could be a direct and immediate impact on student mental health - exacerbated by parallel cuts being made to other student services.

3 **QUESTIONABLE ECONOMICS**

Recent literature (Matthews 2016; Martin 2017) as well as a host of recent reports from other universities that have centralised their administrative staff functions, all suggest that centralisation is a highly risky and potentially counter-productive move. It reduces administration to a remote, impersonal function that cannot deal with all the variants and specifics of complex teaching programmes, and takes real value away from those people - the Departmental professional services staff - who bring an extraordinary range of skills and talents to support the delivery of high-quality teaching and learning. We believe that centralisation is a short-sighted policy that will not deliver at a practical level and will harm our reputation, damage staff morale and disrupt income come streams from both student fees and research funding.

As other universities have demonstrated, dividing up and centralising administrative functions, leaves hundreds of local Departmental tasks to academics, who often lack the skills, time or organisational structures to deliver on these - so leaving a disastrous and costly communications gap between staff and students. Throwing more administration at academic staff (who are already struggling with staff shortages, unfilled posts, and the massive and burgeoning legacy of Covid as it affects teaching) is not only poor economics per se; it will also mean that research and teaching will take a back seat as academic staff become amateur local administrators without the necessary specialist skills.

4 OUR COMMITMENT TO DIVERSITY AND INCLUSIVITY

Goldsmiths' reputation is built on its embracing values of inclusivity and diversity. Those who will suffer most from the planned change are the very groups that senior management claim to champion: firstly students from less conventional or more challenging backgrounds, whose retention rates are statistically lower, and who rely more heavily on exactly the kind of point-of-contact support that our admin staff provide; and secondly women, who make up much the largest group of admin staff and who fulfil many of the support roles that are now set to be diminished as they move outside of the Department.

5 RECOMMENDATION

On the basis of the above the testimonies and a statement resolution signed by the overwhelming majority of our academic, technical and professional services staff, we urge Council and SMT to re-consider the 'blueprint' immediately, before the academic year starts and this highly damaging and manifestly counter-productive plan rolls out.

References:

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