

## **A sign of the times: growth, but at what cost?**

I am a professional sculptor who has lived and worked in Cornwall for many years. My relationship with the university goes back 30 years to when I was a sculpture student at Falmouth School of Art between 1984 and 1989. During the 1990s and until 2005 I worked on occasion as a visiting lecturer across several of its departments, and in 2013 I was made a Fellow of Falmouth University. It is an honour that sits uncomfortably with me at this present moment.

I recently returned to Cornwall from a year long fellowship at Bonn University in Germany, to read with interest several of the press articles published last summer in connection with Falmouth University's CEO's salary, the 'Follywood' sign and reports of significant low staff morale.

I share the view that the recently installed FALMOUTH sign on Woodlane is out of place with the local landscape and community. Moreover, the university entrance is now illuminated at night by an excessive number of lights, a vulgarly intrusive display that has negatively altered the ambiance of what is one of Falmouth's most attractive avenues.

In a town that has so many artists and designers, one wonders why something more imaginative and aesthetically appropriate could not have been realised that reflects a sense of Woodlane's rich heritage. Furthermore it is important to remember that this heritage, on which the university's reputation has been built, grew out of what was Falmouth School of Art, established in 1902.

It's also hard not to wonder whether these monolithic blocks, reminiscent of something out of Orwell's 1984, point towards some of the more deeply worrying aspects of Falmouth University's management and how it operates.

I suspect that none of Woodlane's residents had any say over the decision to install such a publicly imposing feature. Perhaps this is why the sign has been the target for vandalism and ridicule.

Walk downhill through Woodlane Campus to the building that houses the Illustration courses, and another disturbing change is evident. Until recently, this was known as the Alan Livingston Building. A plaque hung on the wall outside the door with the former Rector's name carved into slate. Photographs of the naming ceremony can still be viewed online.

For those who may not be aware, Professor Alan Livingston CBE was pivotal to this university's development. For over 20 years, he worked tirelessly, securing Falmouth School of Art from the threat of closure in the 1980s and building it up into what has now become Falmouth University.

As Rector he was liked and respected by staff and students, above and beyond whatever policy was being implemented at the time. As well as being a distinguished graphic designer and academic, he possessed the sophisticated diplomatic skills required for someone of his position. Importantly, he was interested in listening to what others around him had to say. He also demonstrated huge support for the arts by being present at countless gallery openings and other art events in Cornwall and beyond.

Given the current climate at the Falmouth University, one wonders how many of the above qualities the current CEO, Professor Anne Carlisle possesses. What is certain is that her name will be familiar to many by association with recent negative national and local press in connection with her annual salary and benefits of £285,900 and the general mood that prevails amongst Falmouth University staff.

The act of removing a memorial plaque is a disgrace as it demonstrates a basic disregard for the achievements of Professor Livingston. Whoever took the decision to do this should be truly ashamed of themselves. It will no doubt appear to many as a deliberate attempt to erode the institution's memory of its recent history. Again, one is reminded of Orwell's 1984.

I write this letter at a time when staff morale has for some time been extremely low. It is disturbing to listen to and read endless stories about how poorly staff members and students feel they are treated.

No doubt higher education is going through extremely challenging times, and one may congratulate the university on its rapid ascent up some university league tables. However, it is important to add that Falmouth as a college and as an art school always had a great reputation, thanks to the hard work and commitment of staff over decades and the fact that Cornwall is a truly wonderful part of the world to pursue creative studies.

Useful as they are, university league tables do not present the full picture, and one has to ask at what cost these results are being achieved and what condition is the 'engine house' of this institution is presently in? By that,

I am referring to the staff who have the essential job of actually delivering quality education to the students.

Judging from what is reported and from my own conversations with staff, there is reason for alarm, and one must ask to what extent the Governors of Falmouth University are aware of what is happening at ground level.

One senior member of staff has told me: 'It's no exaggeration to say that there is a general atmosphere of fear prevailing among staff at the university. Many are deeply concerned at what's been going on, but very few have dared to speak out. Those that do so tend not to keep their jobs for very long.'

The reputation of the university in the town is also at a low-ebb, with its management being seen as pushing for expansion in student numbers in a way that damages the fabric of life in Falmouth. There are widespread reports of housing stock being taken over by developers and landlords and turned into (often sub-standard) student accommodation. Walking through the streets of Falmouth at night this weekend, it seemed obvious that the town has reached the point at which its very nature is changing, and not in a good way. The towns of Falmouth and Penryn have a total population of approximately 33,000; are the Governors of FU really willing to endorse the proposed increase to 8,000 students (Project 8000) against the wishes of many of the town's residents?

This extremely rapid growth is inevitably impacting on the experience of the students themselves. Several undergraduate courses, with year-groups that now number around 140–150 students, are surely at risk of having their reputations ruined by volume. Indeed, I understand that the students themselves have complained not only that their cohorts are too big, but that Falmouth itself has 'too many students' for a town of its size. It would seem there are very many among the teaching staff who are deeply concerned about both these aspects, and that the increase in BA cohorts has been imposed on staff with scant consultation or understanding of the deleterious effect this will have (is having) on those courses.

Despite this expansion, under Professor Carlisle's management, quite a few arts-based courses have now closed or are about to. It's a situation that appears strangely out of kilter with an educational establishment that lays claim to being the No.1 Arts University.

One of the courses that will go into cessation in 2017 is Contemporary Crafts. This gem of a course was developed over 20 years, from a BA in

Ceramics into a course that brings together a range of disciplines, enabling students to work 'hands-on' with metal, wood, plastics, clay and glass. Many successful art and crafts-based businesses in Cornwall (and beyond) would not have come into being without the grounding that this course provided.

Even while I have been writing this letter, the suspension of another long-running and highly respected course has been announced, no doubt as a prelude to its closure: the Foundation Diploma in Art and Design. This very popular course serves as a vital introduction that enables school-leavers to find their way through practice into a chosen degree discipline. It has been an important gateway to the creative arts for several generations of students.

One can understand that some courses, unable to recruit enough students, are simply not sustainable. But the decision to close or suspend these courses was not due to poor recruitment – both were well subscribed. Contemporary Crafts recruited enough students to make it profitable but was apparently deemed not profitable enough to warrant the space it occupied, as has been reported in the Times Higher Education Supplement. Employability was another factor cited, to the surprise of many of the course's graduates, who have used the skills gained on the BA to make their living and start successful businesses. This is troubling, and one must ask; where does this policy, taken to its logical conclusion, leave Fine Art in the hands of present management?

Do not some courses by their nature need more space and resources than others? A studio-based course will demand more space than a writing or digital media course, because its practice extends three dimensionally.

Creativity is a broad church and innovation is vital to the growth of every learning culture. But not to the exclusion of those courses that remain vitally relevant and important. This university, and indeed this country, will be much diminished if universities streamline everything to £ per square foot, maximizing profit before education. A successful arts university will always need courses where students have the space, time and resources to create physical artefacts, because in the end if we don't value this then we will be left with a generation of computer-based operators who won't know what it is to make things in actual as opposed to virtual reality.

Employability is something that is difficult to gauge statistically. However, as an indication there is a global, multi-billion-pound industry

out there called the art market, which is dependent upon artists and makers. Go to Frieze Art Fair, ArtBasel or Miami and you will observe this first hand. I am one of many Falmouth graduates who have built successful careers in this market.

As a Fellow of Falmouth University, I feel compelled to bring to the Governors' urgent attention a sense of the current mood prevailing amongst staff.

Speaking with tutors, one gets a sense that the university's staff are experiencing constant restructuring, imposed from the top with little or no understanding of the impact this will have in terms of the student experience or the ability of staff to deliver courses that match the requirements of the subject and the needs of their students. Staff who already work extremely hard are finding that they are being pushed beyond reasonable limits. One comment that emerges time and time again is that management have simply lost touch with staff.

Falmouth's latest glossy prospectus invites potential students to come to the creative edge of England in order to 'question convention' and 'reject conformity'. It seems that this ethos does not extend to the staff, who feel that they would be jeopardizing their livelihoods by questioning how things are run at FU.

The university has proved immensely successful in publicizing positive statistics. But significant failures have not received nearly so much attention – for example its failure to achieve Research Degree Awarding Powers (RDAP) and its disappointing performance in the Research Excellence Framework (REF). It might fairly be said that disappointing performances in these areas make it all the more vital that the university should value the resource on which its reputation has been built – the excellence and dedication of its teaching staff.

Much of the Academy of Innovation and Research (AIR), built with EU convergence funding to be 'the home of research and business collaboration at Falmouth University' is now partly taken up with the offices of the Vice Chancellor and her immediate circle. What might be seen as a crisis in the university's research culture was underlined recently when the sudden departure of its head of research, Professor Philip Moore, was announced in an email from the Vice Chancellor that offered neither any explanation nor any good wishes on the Professor's departure. He was only the most recent of a series of senior staff who have left, or been forced to leave, in circumstances that are far from

transparent. Even without the other problems I have described, this might lead many to question whether the Vice-Chancellor's exceptionally large salary can really be justified.

With the current situation as it stands, what needs to be asked is this: Is the present CEO the right person to be leading this university into the future? Is this leadership respected within the university? Is it inspiring the university's staff and strengthening their dedication? If not, then it is surely time for change.

The role of university management should not simply be seen as a business one where the job is to maximize profit. They are the custodians of this precious institution. Management come and go and what remains is legacy, and this matters not just because it is a vital part of the university's reputation but because it forms the very fabric of an institution, affecting the people who make their lives in and around it, for better or worse.

At the university awards ceremony several weeks ago, Professor Carlisle spoke about how the university cares about its heritage, stating that 'Falmouth respects tradition.' If this is the case then I strongly request that the Alan Livingston Memorial Plaque be reinstated to its rightful place. I would ask that this request be supported by Governors. I would also urge the Governors to take steps to make sure that they are more fully informed of the way that the university's leadership is viewed within the university and in the wider community, and to take urgent measures to address the serious problems that I have outlined. Falmouth can and should be a superb place to study the creative arts, but there are many indications that the university's current leadership may be putting this vision in serious jeopardy.

Tim Shaw RA RWA(hon)



