

Opinion **UK universities**

Universities risk their reputations by failing to value teaching staff

In no successful business do smart leaders deliberately alienate frontline workers

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University leaders have awarded themselves huge pay rises while letting academic pay and standards of living fall © PA
Margaret Heffernan 28 MINUTES AGO

Across the UK, [university](#) lecture halls and seminar rooms have been silent as academic staff continue a [wave of strikes](#). Taken at face value, the [industrial action](#) is a textbook case of bad industrial relations.

Lecturers have accepted relatively low pay and pretty poor working conditions in exchange for significant autonomy, relatively secure jobs and pensions. But, over the past decade, without negotiation, every aspect of that deal has been eroded. Autonomy has given way to increased teaching responsibilities, larger classes, more time spent grading and on management duties. Job security has been reduced by eliminating departments and cuts in research funding. Pensions are failing to deliver on their promise.

While [university leaders](#) have awarded themselves huge pay increases, they allowed academic pay and standards of living to decline steadily. Nobody should be surprised that trust has

broken down.

But this strike reveals a management failure more powerful than these compounded sources of resentment. Under successive governments, students have been re-defined as customers. They are served, so to speak, by academic staff who work on the frontline of the main product: student experience. This has shifted strategic focus from the pursuit of knowledge to the pursuit of teaching scores and student survey results.

In no successful business do smart leaders deliberately alienate frontline workers — for the simple reason that they are where satisfaction or disgruntlement comes from. Marginalising and denigrating the very people in whose hands the reputation and future of the business lies is the very definition of bad leadership: dangerous, shortsighted, obtuse.

Who creates the university student's experience? Those lecturers, tutors and researchers; the names and faces of daily learning. These are the people we trust to inspire, encourage and motivate the next generation. Students and parents look to them to encourage ambition, rigour, determination, stamina and curiosity. Ministers go so far as to argue that the knowledge economy of the nation depends on the intellectual output of these students.

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US universities make the same mistake. Much teaching is devolved to dedicated adjuncts, part-timers who are trying to unionise to protest against such low pay they struggle with homelessness or depend on additional, often unsavoury, sources of extra income.

This is not just an academic issue. Worldwide, I see chief executives paying lip-service to consumers — the source of all their revenue — while entrusting their company's reputation to

outsourced, casualised workers who are managed with a disdain they inevitably pass on to the paying public. Appreciative customers are made by appreciated workers. Serious management does not want its customers served by angry, resentful individuals given no reason to love, or promote, the organisation they serve. Lousy service comes from workers ignored by lousy management. Is that what vice chancellors want?

Executives charged with innovation know that their best ideas routinely originate from the insights and observations of frontline staff. If you want to know what your customers value and will pay for, ask the people who talk to them. Cherish these people. That's what makes them creative and inspires their distinctive and exciting ideas. Management literature is awash with volumes on talent; none of it suggests that treating people as dispensable and

cheap brings out their best work.

Occasionally, I teach in British [business schools](#). I love it. Challenge and questioning from the rising generation is something to relish. But you could not run a business school with people like me. I do not know or empathise with my students in anything like the way my full-time colleagues do. I do not make the long-term investment in knowing and growing my students.

Students side with their lecturers in this dispute because they know where their education really comes from: not management, not figureheads, but from their teachers.

The writer is the author of 'Wilful Blindness' and 'A Bigger Prize'

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