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3 November 2011

Professor Edward Acton, Vice-Chancellor
Mr. Richard Jewson, Chairman of the Council
University of East Anglia
Norwich

cc:

Professor John Charmley, Acting Head of the School of Music
Dr. Jonathan Impett, School of Music

Dear Professor Acton, dear Mr. Jewson,

Proposed Closure of the School of Music at UEA

I am writing on behalf of NAMHE (the National Association for Music in Higher Education) with regard to the proposed closure of the School of Music at the University of East Anglia, as announced on 26 October – a proposal which in the meantime has met with considerable echo both in the media and in academia. On behalf of my organisation, I would like to register grave concern, both regarding the substance of this decision and the process by which it was reached. I am referring explicitly to the written report that forms the basis of this decision – a report which has been freely available on the internet for a week now and which is not marked confidential.

The School of Music at UEA is small, but most respected in our discipline for its excellence in teaching and (in some areas) research, particularly in electroacoustic composition. It has ranked very highly in league tables and in the NSS in past years (substantially outperforming UEA as an institution); as the only Music department in the region, it also performs a vital function as a cultural hub and widening participation resource – which the report indeed acknowledges.

What is more, it seems apparent to us that the School has been stronger and more successful than anybody had any right to expect. As the review itself concedes, the recommendations of the 2002 review were never fully implemented – the School has

remained understaffed and since the untimely death of Professor Chadd in 2006 without a senior academic and Head of School. Likewise, the fact that the 'School has weathered prolonged under-investment' but nevertheless 'has maintained its reputation ...' (p. 10) is somehow seen as an argument *against* the survival of the School rather than an indication of the intrinsic excellence and dedication of its staff succeeding where the institution patently stacked the odds against it. We are astounded that these struggles which are obviously the result of decisions by UEA management should be laid at the door of the School of Music, somehow making it (and not management) responsible for failing to achieve the necessary substance and critical mass required for sustained excellence in both teaching and research.

It seems to us that these management decisions are also primarily responsible for the School's lack of demonstrable research excellence in RAE/REF terms (which appears to be the prime reason for its proposed closure, the discussion occupying a full three pages in the report). The unit has been kept small, leading to very substantial teaching and administrative loads, particularly in view of the fact that staff have created a new – and very successful – course in the meantime, and have had to shoulder the very substantial engagement and outreach activities (which are consistently praised) as well. To conclude that the School did less well than the quoted 'competitor institutions' (all bar one research-intensive Russell Group members, a most aspirational benchmark) is disingenuous to say the least when staff at these institutions are able to devote a far more substantial portion of their time to research and receive far stronger infrastructural support to succeed in it. To expect increased grant capture (from a very impressive baseline of more than half a million pounds in 2000–2009) while leaving a research unit without a leader and indeed any senior academics is likewise inherently contradictory.

As far as recruitment is concerned, the report itself concedes that numbers in 2011 were buoyant, but goes on to state that it is 'doubtful' whether this can be sustained under the new fees regime. On the contrary, the new degree in Music Technology introduced in 2009 – which has begun to bear obvious fruit as witnessed in student intake increasing immediately to 37 in 2009 and 2010, and to 49 in 2011 (with 24 in Music Technology) – appears to put sustainability beyond any reasonable doubt; Music Technology is an area of growth in the UK in general and fits well with the School's profile, a fact made obvious by the spectacular recruiting success for such a young programme. There is absolutely no evidence yet how the new fee structure for UK HE will affect recruitment, either overall or specifically for Music. Overall, UCAS figures indicate that applications for Music have been steadily increasing over the past five years, and it is too early to say whether this might change from next year onwards, either in absolute terms or in relation to other disciplines. To derive from such assumptions a case for unsustainability is premature at the very least, and unsupported by any evidence beyond the opinions of the panel; what is more, there is an unsavoury whiff in the review (see p. 10, para. 6.7) of an appetite by other Schools within the Humanities to share the spoils of places freed up by a demise of Music. Whatever the case for closing a department, it appears questionable for that case to be made by a review panel some of whose members potentially stand to profit by reallocation of numbers, creating an obvious conflict of interest.

We are particularly astonished and dismayed over the fact nobody with any subject-specific expertise was involved in this review – no external experts were consulted (in marked contrast to the 2002 exercise), and nobody actually working within the School was heard either. This almost inevitably results in various misinterpretations and claims showing a lack of awareness or knowledge of the workings of a School of Music. The discussion of the subvention to the School for 'enterprise and engagement' activities is a case in point – it is criticised that this subvention had been used in significant part as a 'core subsidy for some time'. Apart from the fact that no evidence is supplied in support of this claim, this assumes that the activities of a music department as an academic unit are somehow separate from its 'engagement activities'. It is precisely in the nature of UK university music departments (and substantially contributes to their success both as academic units and as cultural beacons) that these activities reside in the same building and are performed by the same people – Dr. Choa as Senior Lecturer and University Director of Music being the most obvious case in point. It is a misconception to assume that these 'engagement' activities could simply continue in their necessary breadth without a department supporting and sustaining them both intellectually and practically.

Some claims are not substantiated by any more than anecdotal evidence, such as that of the view of one individual on the lack of structured provision. A look at the course structure on the university website indicates nothing that would substantiate this view. Both the structure and the modular offer are entirely in line with comparable music departments in the UK (borne out by the External Examiner's report cited in the review which found no fault). To view a broad offering of modules in composition, music history and performance as lack of organisation is to misunderstand the nature of a music degree which is precisely about providing students with a wide-ranging education – equipping them with the diverse skills which are indispensable to prepare them for an equally diverse range of possible employment opportunities. To judge any issues with the course and its delivery to be so serious as to be virtually irredeemable is flying in the face of external evidence such as league tables and the NSS which universally testify to its high standard. Finally, the conclusion from a look at other institution's websites that the UEA School of Music compared unfavourably misjudges the nature of websites which are self-marketing tools, not level-headed assessments of fact.

NAMHE concurs with the assessment that substantial investment would be necessary to bring the School Music to a point where it could succeed as it ought to with regard to teaching, research, and infrastructure. To claim, however, that there 'is not the resource' is disingenuous (investment being a matter of strategy, not an Act of God), as is the argument that it would be somehow unfair to other School if money was prioritised on Music. One could as well argue that other Schools may have profited from investment being directed away from Music over the past decade, and that it was now time to redress that imbalance.

NAMHE appeals both to the Vice-Chancellor and to Council – with which the decision of closure ultimately lies – to halt the process and to base any decision on the future of the School of Music on a thorough, rigorous and well-informed review, drawing on

subject-specific expertise from both outside and inside the institution. Council should not be presented with a foregone conclusion based on a hasty review by a small secretive panel which never considered any alternatives scenarios how to safeguard Music provision at UEA under admittedly difficult financial circumstances.

All best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Thomas Schmidt-Beste". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial 'T'.

Thomas Schmidt-Beste