

Goodbye, Mr Laarschot

A Nottingham FE teacher reflects on the recent resignation of Nottingham College CEO, John van de Laarschot.

The November resignation of Nottingham College CEO John van de Laarschot ends a particularly unhappy period for FE in the city. Writing to staff, Corporation chair Carole Thoroughgood noted the 'positive vision and values' Laarschot had helped establish at the college. These sentiments are not shared by most current and former staff or by many local observers. Laarschot's appointment as CEO in 2016 before the merger of the city's two remaining FE colleges - despite no experience of work in education - and his subsequent leadership of the merged college were controversial. His prior appearance on the junk-reality show *Wife Swap* and his £230,000 pay off as Chief Executive at Stoke City council in 2015 did little to help his reputation.

His resignation follows a period of sick leave following a heart attack in April. This was an example, some thought, of a decidedly poetic irony. Staff recall his response when asked at an all-staff meeting about stress levels in the college. Laarschot replied that he didn't suffer stress and so couldn't give a view. He passed the question over to the Human Resources director who he presumably thought was made of less muscular stuff. Self-denial or performative macho? It's impossible to say. It was certainly considered crass, as were his reference to critics in the college as 'FE terrorists' and his question to teachers at a get-to-know-you meeting: *if you only teach for 24 hours a week, what do you do the rest of the time?*

It was commonly agreed: Laarschot was the wrong person for the job. One former senior manager who sat through Laarschot's presentation to the interview panel before his appointment commented on his presentational *chutzpah*; what he lacked was knowledge of the sector. The board was evidently more interested in the *chutzpah* than his lack of know-how.

The merger of the two colleges was followed by an over-hasty reorganisation, not helped by failing IT systems, the loss of local knowledge through redundancy and voluntary departure, and a radical

cut in learning support by a newly-appointed senior manager similarly with no FE experience.

Writing in *Nottingham Post* (28 July 2017), Laarschot set out his mission. He would lead 'an educational revolution' producing workers with the skills and aptitudes local employers needed; 'tough love' would 'replace students' false hopes with real preparation and genuine opportunities'.

His FE revolution eventually led to an ultimatum to staff: sign new contracts or be sacked. The UCU branch balloted for a sixteen-day strike. It was creative, tenacious and successful. At one point, a deal recommended by branch officers and officials was voted down by the branch. They wanted nothing less than Laarschot's capitulation. This is exactly what they got.

Hubris costs.

PSE readers might be interested in the celebration of the strike published online by the East Midlands UCU Retired Members (1).

Lest we forget: the three FE stooges

Laarschot was an FE outsider but not the first Nottingham CEO wanting to revolutionise the sector. Nick Lewis, Broxtowe College principal before and after incorporation, and Amarjit Basi, boss of New College Nottingham between 2011 and 2013, had equally radical intentions.

An architect of post-incorporation FE managerialism, Lewis refused collective bargaining, and ran one of the lowest-paying colleges in the East Midlands. His 1994 Staff College paper, '*Reengineering the culture of a college*', listed the 'forces' he thought held back the cultural changes colleges needed, among them: long-staying staff and, most tellingly, 'the strong priority commitment given by lecturers to students, teaching and curriculum matters'.

Basi was a founding member of the Gazelle Group of Colleges, a coterie of FE CEOs who championed a new kind of 'entrepreneurial learning' that would prepare young people for the hyper-marketised, super-networked world of turbo-capitalism. Its mantra: '*Excellence, Employability and Enterprise*' made no mention of education. Financial crisis led to an investigation by the FE Commissioner, who criticised the college's 'largely unnecessary' deficit, poor financial control, 'expansionist' ambitions, including investments in India, and weak oversight by the governing body. In 2016, Basi left his subsequent post as CEO at Cornwall College following a financial crisis the year before. His pay-off and salary, reported to be over £400,000, made him the highest paid FE CEO of 2015-16.

Bad apples or bad systems?

Are these cases outliers in an otherwise ethical system of FE management? The problem is systemic, not personal.

Nottingham's history of FE asks for systems that are not vulnerable to the pedagogic, ethical and performative vagaries of CEOs and corporations. Other places have similar histories.

The case for democratic educational systems that can support the highest forms of educational practice needs to be made.

Reference:

1. *From FE Revolution to FE Revolt - 16 Days that Shook the Sector. The 2019 Nottingham College Strike* - available online <https://ucuemrrmb.wordpress.com/nottingham-college-dispute-2019/>
-