



George Boyne, The Principal in New Clothes

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Professor Boyne Should Resign as Vice-Chancellor of the University of Aberdeen

By I.SQUIRE



It is undoubtedly unfortunate the shambolic state of the University of Aberdeen; a staggering £15 million deficit, overburdened and underpaid academics, dissatisfied students, cultural vandalism through the axing of modern languages and a crumbling reputation. Who is culpable? The truth is that all blame cannot be attached to a single person.

Some might be tempted to say: "Down with Vice-Principal Karl Leydecker!" However, although his poor management style, ill-treatment of staff and proposal for modern languages merits redundancy — as illustrated by the fact that Academic Senators are contemplating a vote of no confidence at the next Senate meeting — Karl Leydecker should not be used as a scapegoat for all the University's evils. What we need is regime change and the head of our current reign is Professor George Boyne, Principal and Vice-Chancellor.

The majority of the students believe that your remaining in office is not in the best interest of either the University of Aberdeen or the country. It is time for a new leadership that aligns more with the foundational purpose of the University "Open to All and Dedicated to the Pursuit of Truth in the Service of Others" rather than the University's ancient motto "Fear of the Lord is the Beginning of Wisdom".

What makes a good university principal? A good Principal is expected to be a good leader, be transparent, ethical, have effective communication, and have a commitment to the well-being of the institution and its members. At the core of their leadership is the ability to cultivate a positive and inclusive campus culture, fostering an environment where students, faculty, and staff thrive. A good Principal is an excellent resource manager who is able to effectively collect and allocate resources to improve teaching, research and support academic programmes.

A good principal, for example, would not scrap a department because it appears to be underperforming. Instead, he would strengthen it. Ultimately, a good principal is characterised by a passion for education, an unwavering dedication to the institution's success and the ability to inspire others. Sadly, our principal lacks both the aptitude and attitudes of a good leader. He might be a world-renowned academic, but he is also a ruthless Machiavellian, a paint-the-world-grey kind of bureaucrat with the charisma of damp rag and the arrogance of a despot.

Let us explore the track record of Professor Boyne at the University of Aberdeen. Let us go to 2020, in the midst of the Fridays for Future Movement, the Student Council passed a "Meatless Monday" motion aimed at reducing greenhouse emissions on campus. The motion had the overwhelming support of both the Student Councillors and the broader student body. Targeting meat consumption was rooted in alarming studies, estimating that livestock production is one of the largest world polluters, contributing significantly to global greenhouse gas emissions, ranging from 11% to a staggering 19.6%. Therefore, from the point of view of the students, reducing meat consumption was the single most significant way to reduce their carbon footprint on campus. Professor Boyne was a staunch opponent of the initiative and despite the motion's alignment with environmental imperatives and Boyne's professed commitment to the 2040 Agenda and net-zero goals, he categorically refused to implement the Student Council's recommendations, challenging the very facts underpinning the motion in the Student Council itself. This seemingly small incident raises serious questions about Boyne's leadership, his respect for student democracy, his disconnection from the students' concerns, and his consistency with the University's environmental commitments.

We have all heard that a leader leads by example; Professor Boyne does not. During the pandemic, our Vice-Chancellor captured the interest of the national press after he broke lockdown restrictions by travelling 400 miles from Aberdeen to Wales. Professor Boyne alleged to make the visit for a "private health matter". This was at a time where one-hundred positive cases of Covid-19 had been identified within the university's student population. By contrast, the students packed into the university halls of residence were threatened with fines up to £250 and possible suspension or expulsion should they dare to set foot outside their own front door. While Professor Boyne faced no consequences for his breach, the heavy-handed approach towards the students underscores a blatant double standard. This is nothing but hypocrisy at its finest!

While we might have grievances against Professor Boyne, he is not the worst principal; no one can call him a thief, at least. The former Principal, Prof Sir Ian Diamond, was asked to return £119,00 of a pay-off he received from the University in 2020. This payment was from the Scottish Funding Council (SFC), which is in turn, funded by the taxpayers. SFC decided to review the payment made to the former principal because the financial statements did not appear to accord with their understanding of his retirement, and they were not satisfied with the university's response to their initial enquiries. In response, the university repaid the £119,000 of the grant back to the SFC and invited the former Principal to return the sum back to his former employers. However, Sir Ian did not return the money and kept his Diamond jubilee. Professor George Boyne said to the BBC:

"We've received no update on that matter (...) but we've no intention to pursue it."

The Vice-Chancellor was very generous with the former principal; why not grant the same courtesy to the School of Modern Languages? Many in the university believe that Professor Boyne should have taken legal action. Litigation is not only about recovering the sum but also about upholding principles of justice and deterring future misconduct. Letting Sir Ian keep that money not only leaves the matter unresolved but also sends a disconcerting message about the university's commitment to financial transparency and its reputation as a public institution. Professor Boyne was once again careless and his statement to the BBC was distasteful.

The huge social and financial inequality in the UK is not a surprise, but it is particularly concerning in the context of public institutions. Senior management salaries have soared while the university struggles with a £15 million deficit; this raises serious concerns about the fiscal responsibility and leadership priorities of the principal, especially considering that the staff in the modern languages department have received disheartening risk of redundancy letters. A staggering 90% of senior management earns over £100,000, and six individuals have salaries of more than £150,000. In contrast, just five years ago, only 40% of management enjoyed six-figure incomes. Notably, Professor George Boyne's salary as Vice Chancellor has experienced a consistent upward trajectory, reaching £283,662 in 2022. This escalating trend, coupled with additional perks like 'pension contribution, accommodation, and living allowance,' stands in stark contrast to the financial challenges faced by the institution and the majority of the university staff. Just two decades ago, Principals earned salaries in line with other senior professors and were traditionally seen as "first among equals". By contrast, it is estimated that 91% of lecturers work more than their contracted hours while their pay has shrunk by 25% since 2009. Research conducted by *The Gaudie* suggests that the senior management salaries costed approximately 1.6 million in 2023. A 25% pay cut would free up £400,000.

This would be enough to fund the salaries of seven language staff with an average salary of £58,000. Moreover, a year and a half ago, the Senior Management Team allocated £4 million for interdisciplinary fellows and directors, expecting the university to "absorb the resulting deficit." In 2022, the University spent £410,000 in graduations at the TECA complex, and this year nearly £300,000. In fact, the cost of graduation has increased by 70% since 2019. The only reason why the graduations are back on campus for 2024 is because, against the will of George Boyne, the University Senate voted to bring the ceremonies back home. Furthermore, the university spent £178,000 on the new controversial "Go Beyond Boundaries" branding. The disparities in financial priorities and the apparent neglect of the broader university community's well-being call for a critical revaluation of Professor George Boyne's leadership.

Professor Boyne has failed to foster a positive relationship with the university staff, which has sparked significant unrest. This was evidenced by the prolonged UCU strikes last year. His handling of the situation led to the "marking boycott" and the subsequent controversial "fast-track" marking policy, which allowed students to graduate without knowing their final grade, undermining academic rigour and the "quality" of their degrees. Perhaps one of the most infamous things he did was his unfortunate comments in a chat where he said that he would "prefer pain along the way" for the staff that were striking. His comments brought attention of the press and were widely criticised. However, Professor Boyne never issued an apology. Rather ironically, the day before his remarks, university staff were invited to a "Principal's Celebration" event. A reception aimed at celebrating Professor Boyne's tenure. Less than 5% of new university staff signed up for the event before it was cancelled in August, highlighting the disconnect between the Principal and the community. His behaviour stands in stark contrast to the promises he made upon assuming the role of Principal, pledging a management style different from the previous administration, one characterised by compassion and understanding. Boyne's refusal to apologise and acknowledge the impact of his words not only highlights a fundamental lack of empathy but also contradicts the caring ethos he pretended to embody. In the same vein, his reluctance to address concerns raised in the Academic Senate by former Law Convener Tomas Pizarro-Escuti, who was put out of order for talking about the cost-of-living crisis and its implications for student poverty, was disappointing for many students.

As we all know, under the leadership of Professor Boyne, the university has decided to axe modern languages and neglect the education needs of the Northeast of Scotland. Thanks to the efforts of campaigners, the university will continue to offer joint honour programmes in languages. However, Senior Management has failed to make a commitment to safeguarding the job staff and preserving essential degree provisions. It is estimated that even with the decision to continue joint programmes, around 50% of staff within the department remain at risk of redundancy. The elimination of single language degrees would include Gaelic, one of Scotland's national languages. Preserving a degree in Gaelic is vital for cultural heritage, community connection, and language revitalisation. It enriches education, promotes multilingualism, and contributes to Scotland's unique identity. This decision not only contradicts the university's own Gaelic Language Plan but also raises concerns about its commitment to humanities as a broader subject. The consequences of axing language degrees go beyond our beautiful campus, it exacerbates the shortage of modern language teachers in the region. This move not only sets the University of Aberdeen apart as the only ancient university to eliminate these degrees but also perpetuates structural inequalities in education. Children and young people in the Northeast of Scotland are facing with inadequate language provision compared to their peers elsewhere in Britain due to lack of funding, staffing and resources. The University of Aberdeen has the moral duty to preserve languages in the Northeast, this is a matter of national interest that should not be in the hands of unscrupulous people blinded by minor economic considerations caused by their own faults.

Principal Boyne's tenure has been characterised by decisions that not only erode the academic foundations of the institution but also threaten the cultural and educational legacy of the Northeast of Scotland. It is imperative that, in the interest of the university's future and the broader community it serves, a leadership change is pursued to rectify his legacy. A parallel seems to be clearly emerging between him and the emperor in the classic tale "The Emperor's New Clothes." Much like the fabled ruler who remained oblivious to his own nakedness, Professor Boyne seems to be blind to the glaring failures of his own reign.

university of aberdeen

george boyne

senior management

Boyne gate