'We call it the Sussex Way'

A study of Sussex University's institutional culture

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CHUCL
Changing University Cultures

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1. Introduction

In early 2017, incoming Vice-Chancellor Adam Tickell commissioned the Changing University Cultures (CHUCL) collective to conduct research on Sussex's institutional culture. This was a response to on-going and immediate concerns such as: reports of bullying in staff survey data, awareness of long-standing institutional inequalities, and the findings of the independent Westmarland report (2016). The CHUCL collective is a small team formed after conducting similar research at Imperial College London in 2015-16. Our research methodology combines sociology and organisational development: it is a reflexive, experiential and whole-systems approach which highlights power, privilege and institutional dynamics. Our process incorporates a number of different forms of cultural listening and dialogue, such as surveys, interviews, focus groups and action inquiry (Torbert 2004), which provide both telescopic and wide-angle perspectives. Through this, we focus on both interpersonal and organisational issues, and attempt to relate them. We adopt a constructive attitude, which is both politically engaged and sensitive to different viewpoints and complexities. We are guided by Smith's (2005) notion of institutional ethnography, which faces in on the problems of daily life and activities, working on issues participants identify as important.

We carried out our research at Sussex over the course of a calendar year, between April 2017 and April 2018. It involved almost 900 members of the university community, who shared their experiences of working and studying at Sussex with us. The level of participation in our research reflects the pride staff and students feel for Sussex, and how much they want to improve problematic aspects of its culture. The majority of our participants were staff, and female members of professional services in particular.[1] Although this raises questions about who does the institutional 'housekeeping' at Sussex, this group are one of the university's less transient populations and so may be more invested in evolving its culture. These valuable (but often under-valued) members of staff share with us a sense of responsibility for ensuring that Sussex has outward facing values that are congruent with its everyday practices. The energy, desire and capacity staff and students have to give Sussex's cultural evolution should not be underestimated.

It has not been possible to represent the whole of our significant dataset in this report: however, our in-depth analysis has revealed six key themes. These concern dynamics, structures and processes and form a picture of an institution which needs care, attention and resources to achieve its considerable potential. The first of these is *can I just say I love Sussex*, which reflects staff and students' affection for and attachment to the institution, its friendly atmosphere and its tradition of critical thought. The second is *recurring wounds and institutional history*, which especially concerns the recent history of Sussex and the 'unfinished business' it has left. The third is *performative radicalism and persistent inequalities*, which sets Sussex's political discourses against various forms of institutional inequality and privilege. The fourth is *them and us: processes of splitting*, which refers to the divisions and binary views which can emerge in low-trust situations, and the negative relationships and emotions which result. The fifth is *silos and gridlock*, which reflects the current university structure as well as the persistence of the 'Sussex Way' as an inhibitor of progress. Our

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[1] Throughout our report, when we refer to professional services staff we do not generally mean those in senior leadership roles: these staff were not necessarily well represented in our research, and also tended to be seen by our participants as part of the 'management.'

conclusion is entitled *movement and change*, which suggests ways Sussex can build on the tremendous capacity, desire and energy staff and students have for institutional development.

Because our sample was self-selecting, our data may show a slant towards those with negative experiences of Sussex, especially in the non-survey methods. We embrace this however, informed by standpoint theory which tells us that those who are marginalised by a system may have particular insights into it (Harding, 1995). Furthermore, while we have tried to represent our data honestly, we also want to advocate for those who are most unhappy at Sussex. Cultural change research is not usually commissioned to elicit praise but to uncover problematic issues, to make them better. Many in the university community will dislike or disagree with what we have to say. In our experience of organisational development we have found that defensive reactions are common, but we also acknowledge that there can be several experiences and views of the same thing. We also acknowledge that the problems we identify are by no means unique to Sussex: versions of them exist across the higher education sector (although this does not mean they should not be tackled here). We hope to contribute an understanding of how Sussex's unique culture frames these issues, which will help the institution to develop.

CHUCL is underpinned by SHAPE, a capacity-building framework created during our previous research at Imperial College. SHAPE is not a 'quick fix' approach: it is values-based, and aims to counterbalance some of the more dominant negative aspects of marketised higher education. SHAPE is an acronym for *self-awareness, honesty, action, political consciousness* and *empathy*. Although it is always a work-in-progress, we tried to embody this framework in our project at Sussex through our relationships with each other and our research participants, our interactions with the Executive Group, and the process of developing our analysis and recommendations. One of the most important ways we kept SHAPE in play was through constant reflection on our insider/outsider status: three members of the research team are members of Sussex staff, with a total of 35 years at the institution between us. While this gave us intimate insights into Sussex's culture and history, we were also keen to step outside our own experiences and perspectives, to make sure we were representing our participants properly. This required us to employ all the SHAPE capacities.

In order to help evolve Sussex's culture, we have chosen to be constructive and to focus on structures, processes and dynamics rather than particular individuals. Although we acknowledge that some individuals have (and have had) disproportionate influence in the institution, we do not believe that 'naming and shaming', usually followed by 'airbrushing' perceived wrongdoers out of an institution (Phipps, 2018), is an effective way to bring about change. Our recommendations are a set of broad practices through which Sussex might evolve its culture: we hope the institution will implement these as part of an on-going programme of development. We also anticipate that our recommendations will be used to inform various existing initiatives including the progression of the Strategic Framework 2025, the response to the Westmarland Report, and the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Strategy 2025. This report is the end of one process but the beginning of another, and although the actions taken as a result of our recommendations need to be owned by the institution, with a strong commitment from the very top, we will be available to support this work in the short, medium and long-term, if required.

The CHUCL research team at Sussex consisted of Gemma North, Liz McDonnell, Jess Taylor and Alison Phipps. This team conducted the data analysis, with support from Yasin Koc and Gillian Love. Deborah Minto provided administrative support for the research. Alison Phipps, Gemma North, Liz McDonnell, Jess Taylor and Gillian Love have written this report. We are incredibly grateful to all our participants, who gave their time, stories and views to this important work. We also commend the courage shown by the University Executive Group and especially the Vice-Chancellor, in commissioning this study and making its findings public.

2. Methodology

We employed several research methods, so the complex lived realities of the Sussex community could be explored along various dimensions (Mason, 2006). The main research approach was qualitative, with questions that encouraged in-depth answers. We had unexpectedly high participation across our methods, which demonstrated staff and students' commitment to Sussex and energy for its development. We gathered rich, detailed responses from these participants, representing a range of perspectives. During the course of a calendar year we had over 900 inputs from Sussex staff and students (some people may have participated in more than one method, so the total number of participants may be slightly lower). The research was inductive, which means letting data guide the analysis rather than imposing a top-down theoretical framework. We tried to understand the institution through analysing people's interpretations and experiences of it (Bryman, 2012). There were three key fieldwork phases.

The first phase, from May to July 2017, consisted of a university-wide survey, which aimed to get a broad picture of staff and student views (and was distributed after a short pilot). It asked participants to give five words to describe Sussex's culture, their thoughts on its strengths and weaknesses, and how it could be enhanced.[2] More than 700 members of the university community took part. We analysed this data using SPSS (for the five words) and NVIVO (for the other questions). In SPSS, we calculated the ten most popular words for Sussex's culture, coded these as positive, negative or neutral, and looked at who was more likely to use them. The NVIVO analysis was an intersectional one which foregrounded the experiences of groups that can become lost in large datasets, while maintaining a robust analytical approach.

Intersectionality is a framework introduced by Crenshaw (1989), which proposes that people have many social positions (e.g. gender, class, race, and others) and that these have complex dimensions of power. Intersectional work draws attention to how certain groups are erased by single-dimension analysis and politics, for example how black women have been marginalised by both white women in the women's movement, and black men in the Civil Rights movement (Crenshaw, 1989). Our intersectional survey analysis began with BAME[3] women and non-binary people, whose responses were used to generate the initial themes. For each open-ended question in the survey, data from this group were coded first. Focus then shifted to three other groups in turn: all BAME people;

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[2] 'Culture' was defined as consisting of values, ideas, customs and social practices, and any other factors that participants felt were relevant.
[3] BAME stands for black, Asian and minority ethnic.

LGBTQIA+ people[4]; and people with disabilities.[5] These stages overlapped because some individuals were part of several groups. Finally the whole dataset was coded, to ensure we had not left anything out. This gave us a set of themes, and information about how these changed and evolved at different stages and with different groups. Because of this feature, it has been argued that intersectional approaches in quantitative research increase validity and generate more nuanced understandings (Bauer, 2014).

The second fieldwork phase consisted of in-depth interviews, focus groups and an anonymous WordPress blog. The majority of this data collection occurred between June and September 2017. Our research participants were mainly self-selecting, although we approached some individuals specifically: for example, when it became apparent that the proportion of professional services participants was far higher than academics, that SEF staff were under-represented and that the professoriate had hardly participated at all.[6] Our interviews and focus groups lasted for 45 minutes to one hour. The anonymous WordPress blog contained a short form in which participants were invited to submit their narratives and thoughts directly to us (they were not published on the blog) – they were not asked to give their names, and demographic data was optional. Through these data collection processes, over 160 people shared their thoughts and stories with us.

Following transcription of interviews and focus groups, we used NVIVO to implement a systematic and rigorous data analysis. This involved generating themes from patterns in the data, and using 'constant comparison' and identification of 'deviant' or 'contrary' cases to check the validity of these (Burnard et al, 2008). These themes were then cross-referenced with those which had emerged from the survey, in order to combine data types and ensure we had not left anything out. The interview and focus group analysis foregrounded the stories of women working in professional services, because they were the majority of our participants in these data types. These participants can also be defined as marginalised within the Sussex system, so this fitted with our aim to focus on the most excluded voices.

A Grounded Action Inquiry (GAI) process was implemented during the third phase, between October 2017 and January 2018. This consisted of several action inquiry (AI) cycles 'grounded' in our initial data analysis. Our AI themes captured key issues referring to strengths or weaknesses of Sussex's culture, or qualities which were lacking in it. These were: *action, agility, consequences, courage, difference, entitlement, learning, power, responsibility, trust* and *uncertainty* (we ran two sets on *power*). AI is an organisational development technique in which members of an institution or organisation come together in groups to tackle particular issues or questions. It operates as a cycle, which involves discussion, action and reflection. AI participants were asked to sign up to a themed group and participate in four two-hour sessions, carried out at around two week intervals. Groups consisted of up to ten people, with two co-facilitators from the CHUCL team. Fourteen sets were

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[4] LGBTQIA+ stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual (plus other identities which may come under this umbrella such as non-binary, gender non-conforming, and pansexual).
[5] As women as a broad category were very well represented at all stages of the research, they were not chosen as one of these marginalised groups. This was also a way to counterbalance the general tendency for white women to be used as a proxy for women in general: instead, we used BAME women.
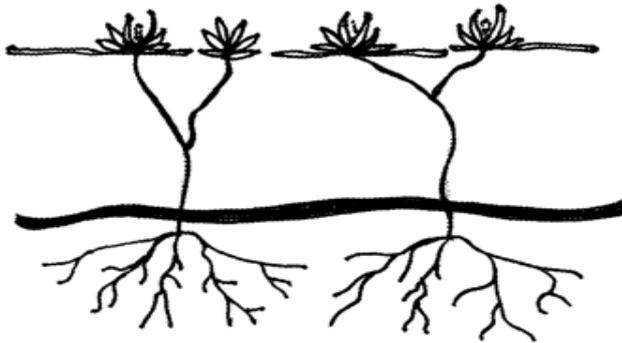[6] Following a direct appeal by the Vice-Chancellor we had a large number of volunteers from the professoriate – this group are well-represented in our final dataset. We also conducted a focus group specifically for SEF staff.

planned but twelve were carried out (two were cancelled due to lack of interest). Overall, 65 people participated in our AI groups.

We used our research data to set the themes for our AI groups, but our participants also generated additional insights and ideas. Sessions consisted of reflective discussions and a range of experiential activities, which promoted understandings of Sussex as a complex system, and their roles in it. We drew on Schien's (2004) Lily Pond model (see Figure 1) to facilitate this. This is a metaphor for three levels of organisational culture:
- o Level 1 represents the manifestations of culture which are possible to see and hear. For example, the way offices are set out, dress codes and forms of communication.
- o Level 2 signifies the values which underpin this culture, the stems which support the 'flowers' on the surface (these are not necessarily the espoused values of an organisation).
- o Level 3 is the hidden root system, the assumptions and unacknowledged values, which nourishes the whole plant (and which can be both positive and negative).

Figure 1: the Lily Pond model

Our AI participants found the Lily Pond helpful in understanding implicit assumptions and relationships at Sussex, and reflecting on the level of congruence between espoused values and everyday experiences. Action inquiry is a multi-level technique: it requires participants to work from the 'inside out' (Torbert 2004) and consider their own role in institutional issues, while keeping the systemic in play.[7] It also focuses on organisations as part of wider socio-political and economic environments (Torbert, 2004). In this way, AI disrupts traditional ways of knowing as it encourages participants to be both inside and outside themselves, and the organisations they work in (Hesse-Biber 2014: 3). 'Four walls' principles (complete confidentiality) or 'Chatham House rules' (outside discussion without identification of individuals) were observed in our AI sessions, depending on what was being discussed. Due to the dialogic, personal and dynamic nature of AI we did not formally collect data, although we collected post-it notes and used whiteboards during discussions (and the whiteboards were photographed). Co-facilitators also de-briefed after the sessions, and made notes. We conducted a thematic analysis of all these data, which appear in our report in summary form as we did not collect quotes from individuals.

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[7] We also took this approach to many of our interviews, especially at senior levels.

Although it is perhaps not foregrounded in our data presentation, the AI process was pivotal in shaping our overall analysis of Sussex's complex system. Our GAI methodology of research followed by action inquiry is also a way to kick-start the process of cultural evolution: it aims to help individuals and groups understand personal and institutional issues, develop relationships, and generate energy for personal and institutional development. We use AI in our research to explore our data themes more deeply *and* to generate capacities and ideas for the next stage of the change process. Our AI participants are 'change agents' at Sussex, and we owe them a huge debt of gratitude for their commitment to the institution and their contribution of time and energy to our project. We hope these participants, as well as others, will be centrally involved as Sussex implements its response to our recommendations.

As well as our main research methods, we used participant and non-participant observation and looked at documents to give context. Our research strategy was flexible, adaptable and developmental, to suit the institution and the needs of participants. For example, if a participant expressed fear about sharing their views in a focus group, we offered an alternative such as an individual interview or completion of the anonymous WordPress blog. Table 1 shows the different foci of each of our research methods, with approximate numbers of participants.

Table 1: research methods and focus

Method	Participants	Focus
Open-text survey	700+	Description of the culture at Sussex and its strengths and weakness How Sussex's culture could be enhanced
In-depth interviews Focus groups	58 14 groups, 80+ participants	Experiences of work and study Suggestions for cultural change
Observations	Carried out on a constant basis	Behaviour, clothes, conversations, body language, interactions in varied social and spatial contexts (e.g. cafes, meetings, events)
WordPress	25 submissions	Personal experiences of intersecting equality issues at Sussex e.g. class, race, gender, sexuality
Action inquiry	12 groups, 65 participants	Groups using personal, group and wider system observations to explore themes from our initial data analysis

Our research was given ethics approval in April 2017 by the *Social Sciences Cluster Research Ethics Committee (C-REC)*. We developed an information sheet and consent form for all face-to-face participants, and assured them of anonymity and confidentiality in reporting their data. Because of the need to protect participants (and the severe under-representation of some groups at the university, which could make some people identifiable), we have restricted personal details attached to quotes in our report to gender and job role. For focus group participants this information was not available, as it was not recorded as part of the complex transcription process. Survey respondents have simply been assigned a number.

We put in place a support and accountability framework to monitor our work. Three groups were convened for the research team to report to on a monthly basis:

1. An external advisory group consisting of four individuals with relevant expertise, located at other institutions or organisations. They were consulted for their expert insights on our data and emerging findings, throughout the life of the project.
2. A reference group consisting of six individuals, located at other institutions or organisations. They received regular electronic updates on the progress of the project, our data and emerging findings, and were invited to offer feedback.
3. An internal group consisting of eight members of the Executive Group and/or Leadership Team at Sussex. They did not perform a consultative or advisory role and did not have access to any data, but were kept updated on the progress of the project and asked to offer support when needed.

We are very grateful for the input of these groups, especially to external colleagues who contributed their time and expertise at no cost, because of their interest in our work.

2a. Participant demographics

We recruited participants via communications on the university website and regular email bulletins. We actively invited participation from under-represented and/or marginalised groups. This included, but was not restricted to, self-identified women and non-binary people, BAME people, people with disabilities, people who identified as LGBTQIA+, people who considered themselves to be working class, staff on short term contracts or working part-time, international staff, and those who felt their age (younger or older) or religious background made a difference to their experience of studying or working at Sussex. Of course, these categories overlapped, and we were particularly interested to hear from students and staff marginalised across more than one identity category.

Table 2 presents a breakdown of our survey respondents. The most represented groups were women, professional services staff, heterosexual people, and white people.[8]

Table 2: survey participant demographics

Age	Gender identity[9]	Disability	Sexual orientation	Ethnicity	Role
16-25 – 26%	Female – 58%	No – 80%	Asexual – 1%	Asian – 4%	Academic – 28%
26-35 – 17%	Male – 32%	Yes – 14%	Bisexual – 7%	Black – 2%	PG student – 9%
36-45 – 20%	Non-binary – 1%	MD – 6%	Fluid – 5%	Mixed – 3%	Professional services – 38%
46-55 – 20%	Other – 2%		Gay – 4%	White – 82%	
56-65 – 10%	PTNS/MD – 7%		Heterosexual – 70%	Other – 4%	SEF – 2%
Over 66 – 1%			Lesbian – 2%	MD – 5%	UG student – 23%
PTNS/MD – 6%			Other – 6%		
			MD – 5%		

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[8] PTNS = prefer not to say. MD = missing data.
[9] The phrasing of the gender question was 'which, if any, gender do you identify with?' We phrased it in this way in order to be as open and inclusive as possible.

Survey demographics were collected via a set of mainly closed questions, as part of the survey completion process. In contrast, our interview and focus group participants were sent a short, largely open-text form, following their participation. A total of 73 participants responded with their details. Among those who responded, the most represented groups were women, professional services staff, heterosexual people, and white people (see Table 3).

Table 3: focus group and interview participant demographics[10]

Age	Gender identity	Disability	Sexual orientation	Ethnicity	Role
16-25 – 4% 26-35 – 15% 36-45 – 28% 46-55 – 31% 56-65 – 15% Over 66 – 6% PTNS/MD –1%	Female – 66% Male – 33% PTNS/MD – 1%	No – 81% Yes - 19%	Asexual – 1% Bisexual – 4% Gay – 5% Heterosexual – 77% Lesbian – 7% Other – 4% MD – 1%	Arab – 1% Asian – 5% Black – 1% Mixed – 1% White – 84% Other – 4% PTNS/MD – 4%	Academic – 27% PG student – 3% PG/academic – 4% Professional services – 58% SEF – 4% UG student – 1% PTNS/MD – 3%

46 of our Action Inquiry participants responded to a similar request to submit demographic information, usually sent during or after the cycles. Participation in this deep and time-consuming work was particularly high amongst women, professional services staff, heterosexual people and white people (see Table 4). 65% of respondents submitting data were women in professional services roles.

Table 4: AI participant demographics

Age	Gender identity	Disability	Sexual orientation	Ethnicity	Role
16-25 – 2% 26-35 – 15% 36-45 – 24% 46-55 – 26% 56-65 – 24% Over 66 – 4% PTNS/MD –5%	Female – 76% Male – 18% PTNS/MD – 6%	No – 84% Yes - 16%	Asexual – 2% Bisexual – 2% Gay – 4% Heterosexual – 83% Lesbian – 4% Other – 3% MD – 2%	Black African – 4% European – 9% Other – 3% White (or white British – 84%	Academic – 26% PG student – 2% Professional services – 65% Professional services/academic – 2% SEF/academic – 2% PTNS/MD – 5%

While we do not have demographic data for all participants, this information corresponds to our general impression of our sample. However, our data analysis, and what we know sociologically, means that we interpret the relative participation of each of these groups differently. The over-representation of women and professional services staff (and people who fit both those categories in particular), suggests that those who tend to look after the administrative and emotional wellbeing of the university have also done the 'heavy lifting' in this cultural change project. The under-representation of BAME people, however, may be an insight into who feels most alienated from Sussex's culture (especially considering the fact that the staff body is over 75% white). We also

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[10] These categories were all based on self-identification; this was the same for the AI participants.

wonder whether the whiteness of our project team (we are all white women) might have created discomfort around sharing views and stories with us, especially in the more intimate settings of focus groups, interviews and action inquiry cycles. Students are under-represented in our research: this is partly due to the timing of our commission, which meant that it was not possible to distribute the survey before the summer term. It may also reflect the relative transience of student populations and how this impacts on their investment in developing the institutional culture – this was also the case in our research at Imperial College (Phipps, McDonnell and Taylor 2016). This interpretation of student involvement is supported by the fact that students who participated in interviews, focus groups and AI cycles tended to be postgraduates, while undergraduates preferred to fill in the survey.

3. Research findings

3a. 'Can I just say, I love Sussex?'

Perhaps the most important message that emerged from our research is how passionate Sussex staff and students feel about the institution. Of the five words entered by survey participants to describe Sussex's culture, the top six most commonly-used were positive: *friendly, diverse, supportive, open, liberal and ambitious*. Our interview, focus group and AI data presented a less positive picture, perhaps due to the deeper exploration enabled by these methods and the self-selecting nature of the sample. It is also worth noting that students were better represented in the survey than in our other research methods, and were more likely to use positive words than staff. Our research narrative is also complex because aspects some participants highlighted as positive others saw as negative, or it was felt that the reality of life at Sussex did not quite live up to the rhetoric. However, the passion for Sussex was constant in all our data types and in many cases, framed participants' critiques: strong attachments mean there is a strong investment in how the university is and what it does. As one of our focus group participants said at the end of a session, '*before I go, can I just say I love Sussex?*' Participants who discussed Sussex's more difficult issues usually did so because they wanted to improve the environment. We begin our report from this place, to set a context for the discussion that follows. Our critiques, like our participants', come from a deep affection for the institution.

Sussex's physical environment loomed large in participants' affections: its green surroundings evoked a sense of space and proximity to nature. For instance, a focus group participant remarked on how special it is, '*in your lunchbreak, to just literally be able to step out the door and you're in the countryside*.'[11] The campus was also seen as an excellent place to conduct intellectual work: as one survey respondent (153) put it, Sussex has '*a campus environment which, when looked after, and when its innate green, tree-lined qualities are respected, provides a stimulating and enriching place to think*.' Another (643) similarly commented that the '*beautiful surroundings*' of the campus could '*offer a culture of serenity and calmness*.' Some participants debated the merits of Sussex's modernist architecture, when set against its ancient scenery, but there was a consensus about wanting to protect and promote the campus as something that makes Sussex unique. As the previous survey respondent continued: '*we can play to this strength m*ore.' Our participants also strongly identified Sussex with the city of Brighton, often referring to both concurrently. As one female academic put it, '*the campus is beautiful; the city is amazin*g.'

The friendliness of Sussex was a strong theme in our research. 'Friendly' was one of the two most common keywords used in our survey to describe the institution, coming up 194 times (see Figure 2). Free-text comments in the survey also referred to this quality. For instance, one respondent (378) wrote: '*it is a friendly place to work with a great deal of goodwill*' and another (104) described a ' '*casual (not snobbish) atmosphere*.' A third (136) commented: '*people are very friendly here, and I feel lucky to have great colleagues in the School*.' Focus group participants made similar statements, such as: '*it's a friendly and collegial place to be*' and '*a really friendly, and actually lovely place in some ways to work*'. A focus group participant who was not a UK national said: '*I have been thinking of leaving the UK, but one of the things that holds me here is actually the nice atmosphere at Sussex. People are friendly and approachable*.'

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[11] When we present participant quotes in this report, these have been chosen from a bigger collection related to the research theme in question (because they are particularly interesting, or particularly well expressed, or show the complexities of issues in helpful ways).

Figure 2: most common descriptors for Sussex's culture, from the survey

Linked to this, 'diversity' appeared as a motif throughout. It was the other word most frequently used by survey respondents to describe Sussex's culture, coming up 194 times, although more frequently used by students than staff and more dominant in the survey than the other methods. In the qualitative survey comments, diversity appeared in various ways: for instance, one respondent (97) referred to '*the mutual respect of humans*' and another (302) referenced a '*strong sense of identity and belonging.*' A third (582) specifically commented that '*the diversity amongst the student body [was] phenomenal.*' A fourth (577) wrote: '*there is a tolerance and respect for people of differing walks of life and a commitment to increasing diversity and representation*', and a fifth (422) said: '*I think the biggest strength the university has is its air of acceptance, this allows students to wear what they want, appear how they please and there is no judgment.*' Later on, we will reflect more deeply on the distinctions between friendliness and collegiality, and between diversity and addressing power relations. However, the overwhelming impression from our participants was that Sussex was a nice place to be.

After 'friendly' and 'diverse', 'supportive' was the next-most common word used to describe Sussex. One survey respondent (40) said they were '*surrounded by supportive colleagues and mentors*', and another (203) similarly commented: '*I feel most staff are supportive of each other and willing to help each other out.*' In our action inquiry (AI) sessions, participants also noted many supportive individuals and initiatives in the institution. Like our other themes, support is complex: our interview and focus group data presented a different picture of the institution, in which staff especially were not always able to communicate effectively or give and receive support. There are also issues about who is providing support institutionally: as one survey respondent (182) noted, '*the school support staff, the school office and the school manager work hard to provide a heart for the school which I deeply appreciate. This emotional labour goes unrecognised but our school's wellbeing depends on it (it's mostly women).*'

The final major aspect of Sussex participants appreciated and expressed strong attachments to was its rigorous, critical and open thinking. For instance, a survey respondent (103) commented that the

institution was '*exploratory, open to new ideas, generally socially progressive and aware.*' Another (288) highlighted the institution's '*commitment to progressive thought*' and a third (646) referenced Sussex's '*legacy of critical thinking and left of centre social-democratic principles.*' A male academic interviewee described Sussex as a '*lateral thinking kind of institution that innovates*', and a female one said: '*I think we are passionate about the research that we do, we're passionate about the student experience*.' Many participants also spoke proudly of a determination not to compromise academic integrity for commercial gains. One survey respondent (232) saw Sussex as '*one of the last bastions of resistance to accepting that education is in a competitive, commercial market these days*.' Another (652) saw Sussex as '*a stronghold against neoliberal practices that are destroying universities elsewhere in this country and in the world*.' This aspect of our data is also multidimensional: we will argue later that Sussex 'radicalism' can sometimes be more apparent than real. However, there is no doubt that most of our participants saw the political orientation of the institution as a major strength. In fact, the critical comments participants also shared about Sussex are a testament to the culture of free thought it has maintained, even in neoliberal times.

3b. Recurring wounds and institutional history

The past is very present at Sussex: this may be true of any organisation (Browning 1991), but at Sussex it seems particularly so. Within all our different types of data, many participant stories were framed around the impact of the previous Executive Group[12], between 2007 and 2016. Because of the dates of our data collection, much of our analysis can be read as commentary on that period. Some participants acknowledged that this Executive had faced serious economic problems: in the words of a male member of professional services, '*Sussex was close to going bust and changes had to be made.*' Some also perceived Sussex as experiencing greater economic success following the implementation of change: for instance, a focus group participant thought the institution was now '*doing much better than some Russell [Group] universities*'. However, many of our participants commented on the very corporate, '*dictatorial*' (survey respondent 237) and '*command and control*' (survey respondent 187) approach adopted to managing the university during this time. A female academic called this '*edict culture*', meaning:

> A culture of things they'd tell us we had to do, and there'd never be an explanation as to why we had to do it, what the process was to get to that point and whether there might be another way of doing things; there wasn't a proper debate about it; no consultation or kind of engagement.

Long-serving members of staff saw this as a shift away from previous leadership approaches. A male academic commented that previous Vice Chancellors would '*listen to people I think. They wouldn't always change the direction they were going in, but you genuinely felt they would listen to you and take your views seriously.*' Another male academic similarly said that prior to this period the university was: '*quite a consultative place, things would change, but before change was introduced, proposals were circulated, comments were invited and comments would even make a difference occasionally.*' In contrast to this, this participant characterised the recent history of Sussex as marked by '*top down crap*'. He described this as '*mushroom management*', a phrase which has been

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[12] The name of this group has undergone many changes during Sussex's recent history – for ease of understanding, we use Executive Group throughout to refer to the most senior leadership of the university.

referenced in media discussions of contemporary problems within organisations (see for example Ali, 2015). He explained this, with laughter, as *'keep[ing] people in the dark and occasionally throw[ing] shit at them.'* Our AI participants who had been at the university during 2007–16 recalled change *happening to* them rather than a process they had been invited to participate in and own. They associated this with bewilderment, uncertainty, anger, frustration and despair and felt that its impact on Sussex's culture should be acknowledged (and this is a key element of our analysis).

The first major change implemented by the previous Executive Group was the redundancy of 107 members of staff in 2010. Participants who had been aware of this process commented negatively on how it had been handled. A perceived lack of institutional empathy was expressed in phrases such as *'no real concern about the human consequences'* and *'central management were willing to operate in the most ruthless kind of way'*. An academic directly involved in managing the redundancies commented on *'how clear it was that all the discussions we had with them were kind of a bit of a sham. They were just going through the motions that they had to go through.'* There is a wealth of evidence that downsizing and redundancies negatively affect the morale of 'surviving' employees and their trust in leadership (Campbell-Jamison et al., 2001). How redundancies are handled also has a significant impact on this 'survivors' syndrome'. Redundancies occurring with a lack of consistent and clear communication from leadership about their vision for the organisation are particularly negative (Hitt et al., 1994). Our participants' quotes reflect a feeling that the redundancy process at Sussex had not been truly consultative, but that the Executive Group were '*just going through the motions*.'

The second major change was the 2009 restructuring in which the current 12 Schools and professional services divisions were created. Previously, five Schools were clustered together in broad, interdisciplinary groupings: Humanities, Life Sciences, Science and Technology, Social Sciences and Cultural Studies, and the Sussex Institute. The 2009 restructure created 12 new Schools with narrower disciplinary remits, and professional services was restructured to support these. One male academic described this as creating a *'completely different feel'* at Sussex, as the structure shifted to more tightly focused units. Participants also associated this with the creation of silos and competition between the new Schools, and a 'great divide' (in the words of survey respondent 71) between the Executive Group and the rest of the community. We will return to both these themes later. All these developments, in the words of another survey respondent (99), were *'counterproductive to the development of a collective culture and individual wellbeing.'* Indeed, there was some fear amongst our participants that our project was the preamble to another similar restructuring of Sussex.

Thirdly, many of our participants recalled the outsourcing of a number of university services and 235 staff, announced in 2012 and implemented in September 2013 (for catering and conference services) and January 2014 (for estates and facilities management). This was seen as part of an explicitly corporate agenda. Some staff who had been outsourced to Sussex Estates and Facilities (SEF) during this time participated in our research, although not in large enough numbers for us to fully understand the impact of the outsourcing. Those who spoke to us generally felt happy with their current situation: a female SEF manager said, *'SEF to me personally have been fantastic, absolutely fabulous, a lot of things have improved, our HR is amazing.'* Another SEF participant commented that before the outsourcing, they were *'getting completely fed up with working for the university, [so] it*

probably came at a good time.' However, as participation from SEF staff was relatively low, these quotes should perhaps not be seen as representative. Our data contain a great deal of evidence of difficult relationships and splits between SEF and the rest of the university (which we will discuss later). These may have shaped the lack of participation from SEF in our research, and may reflect what a member of SEF staff in one of our focus groups called *'fragmentation - feeling undervalued, feeling disvalued, given away, all those things'* in relation to the outsourcing..

The groups Sussex Against Privatisation and Occupy Sussex were established in 2012 to protest against the outsourcing proposals. In February 2013, hundreds of students began an occupation of Bramber House, which lasted 55 days and gained national media attention (Ratcliffe, 2013). Student occupations were dominant in participants' stories about Sussex's recent history. A SEF employee described the occupations and outsourcing protests as a *'horrible period of time'*, and participants felt these events had exacerbated adversarial relationships between the Executive Group and the rest of the university community. In particular, they commented on the defensive and inaccessible management style adopted during and after this period. As one female academic said:

> *They spent the whole of that period of the administration in a state of kind of defensiveness. You know, hence all the security controls and the lockdowns in Sussex House. Hence not going out and about on the campus. Hence never engaging. And so it created this culture of 'us and them'. And there wasn't any work done to undo that.*

Sussex House was frequently described using military language, such as *'bunker'* and *'fortress'*, and the Executive Group were called a *'regime'* or *'guard*.' A female academic reflected that during and after the occupations this group had tended to *'emit some edict to the campus and then lock the barricades and go up into space again.'* Again, we will return to this later.

When the current Executive Group appeared in our data, it was generally with a sense of hope: this was an especially strong theme in the survey. Hope was mainly related to increased openness and transparency: due to the timing of our research and especially the survey, participants associated this particularly with the Westmarland Report and response, following the Lee Salter case. In our interviews, a male academic referred to this as a '*breath of fresh air*', and another commented that '*the atmosphere in the university has improved a lot*.' A survey respondent (74) wrote: *'I think the new VC has come in and has been very vocal about transparency and openness, trying to push through change and welcome debate and opinion'*, and another (179) similarly reported: *'since the new VC arrived, we have witnessed signs of a dramatic change and significant improvement, with a more open, consultative and collegial approach.'* Our AI participants also felt that although Sussex needed more openness and transparency from leadership, this was beginning to emerge. Although more needs to be learned about the impact of the 2018 industrial action, these comments suggest positive developments in Sussex's culture which need to be captured and built upon. The open publication of this report is a further step in this direction.

3c. Performative radicalism and persistent inequalities

The Sussex Development and Alumni Relations webpage *Talkin' 'bout my generation* captures memories and stories about the university in the 1960s and 70s, with pictures of groups and bands that played on campus. The majority of our participants associated this history with 'radicalism', and the need to reconnect with the institution's radical past was a key theme in our survey data. For instance, one respondent (534) wrote: *'In the 60s and 70s it was the small radical university, but now it has become a middle sized research institution, [it] seems to have lost some of its authenticness.'* However, both the images on the Sussex website and some of the comments in our data suggest that 'radicalism' at Sussex has been, and is, held and expressed in a particular way.

Our initial survey analysis, based on the responses of BAME women and non-binary people, revealed scepticism about Sussex's 'radical' history. For instance, one respondent (215) commented, *'the 'good old days' encompasses nostalgia for a politically radical golden age, centring on aspirations for social justice and equity, but this period coincides with a golden age of white heteronormative male patriarchy.'* A female interviewee, an academic who had come to the university in the 1970s, commented on its *'laissez-faire'* cultural ethos at this time, recollecting that *'we all sat in on the Vice Chancellor's lawn and smoked marijuana.'* However, she also saw this as *'borne of this sort of upper middle class feeling of entitlement to live and let live.'* Comments such as these, and others, reflected broader critiques of 60s and 70s 'radicalism' as being largely white, middle class and male (Hughes 2015). They also suggest that in some ways, the remembrance of Sussex's historical 'radicalism' is a form of *anemoia*, meaning nostalgia for a time which has never, in fact, been known.

The degree of genuine radicalism currently present at Sussex is difficult to measure. However, some of our participants certainly felt that Sussex's present politics were more style than substance. One focus group participant referred to Sussex *'commodifying radicalism'*, while another commented: *'yes, I think maybe the students are edgy but I don't think the staff are.'* When asked what they perceived to be the weaknesses of the culture at Sussex, many survey respondents indicated that

the University lacked the radical or equitable practice that its reputation suggests. For instance, one (617) wrote that the institution was '*corporate but tries to pretend it isn't. Would like to think that it is radical but that hasn't been so for many years.*' Another (80) stated that '*Sussex deludes itself that it is an outward facing, 'global' university*' when in fact '*it is a parochial little university on the South Coast of England, that is awash with middle-class white, maleness.*' A third (445) noted that the University '*endorses [the] "radical activist" nature of Sussex then has repeatedly quashed these student acts, often with harsh punishment,*' and stated that Sussex was '*fetishising [the] left wing image of university without allowing it to thrive.*'

Demographic data about the institution and our qualitative data on the experiences of marginalised groups within it, can also either be seen as challenging Sussex's claims to radicalism or confirming that the idea of 'radicalism' can itself be exclusionary. Although diversity was one of the two most popular words in our survey, some respondents noted the lack of actual diversity in the institution, suggesting that diversity may be a discourse or aspiration rather than a practice or reality. In the words of respondent 296, '*we talk about ourselves as valuing diversity, when it is manifestly obvious that the university does not value (ethnic, political, social) diversity, at all, at least among the faculty.*' Participants also modelled this in our AI sessions, in which they were asked to represent the institution using Duplo. One of the models is pictured below: in it, white men and one white woman stand at the top of the university, with others beneath (and black people at the bottom), who have an almost vertical hill to climb. Professional services staff (who were the majority of our AI participants) are represented by farm animals in a pen.

This model represents the persistence of serious race, class and other inequalities at Sussex, despite its radical reputation and ambitions. Participants across the AI groups highlighted the lack of diversity in the staff population and the many ways in which they had either directly experienced, or

observed, incidents which perpetuated exclusion. The problem of representation without meaningful participation was also noted: for instance, some participants reported being invited to particular meetings to represent a group but not feeling heard or indeed comfortable to speak at all. Research shows that representation without an opportunity to participate equally is relatively meaningless: deeper power and privilege issues need to be addressed (Miller and Katz, 2002).

Embarrassment about the whiteness of the staff population was a strong theme in our data. In our AI sessions, this was described as a *'predominance of whiteness in every space.'* One focus group participant remarked on the *'awful irony of us sitting round this table discussing how to increase diversity, and we are all white.'* Another commented:

> *I think, for me, being a student of colour and like, even looking at, like, the professorship or looking at the academics, looking at the staff management, there's no people of colour and if there are (laughter) they're very few and far between.*

Some participants also differentiated between the representation of overseas students – also cited by other institutions as evidence of 'diversity' (Phipps, McDonnell and Taylor, 2016) – and a genuine decolonisation of the institution. A focus group participant felt that Chinese students especially were being *'recruited and exploited'* for the benefit of the university's brand, both financially and symbolically. The university leadership was seen as *'table of white men'* (as expressed by a female member of professional services), and participants thought the most diverse division of the university was SEF, also the division in which staff tend to work in the most difficult conditions for the poorest rewards.

In our survey analysis, the idea of 'addressing power and oppression' accounted for only 5% of coded material, most of this contributed by BAME women and non-binary people. In contrast, ideas about diversity and inclusion accounted for 23-25%. This suggests that at Sussex, diversity has a particular meaning. Diversity of thought and discipline appear important: the 'diversity and inclusion' theme included a 'tolerance of non-left-wing views' sub-theme, which emerged strongly when responses from white men were coded (and we will return to this later). Staff and students also identify with Brighton's reputation as a cosmopolitan and accepting place to be, particularly in relation to its LGBTQIA+ community. For instance, as a male academic said:

> *Here at Sussex, I'm pretty sure that it's a university that deals very, very well with my characteristics, in being gay and a foreigner in this university means nothing – you're like anyone else almost. Because there's so many LGBT people around and there's so many foreigners around, I think I blend completely and nobody notices any of that.*

However, it was also suggested by participants that some modes of inclusion are more present at Sussex than others. For instance, as a focus group participant said: *'the university is really keen on [LGBT staff], but when it comes to race and like hiring staff of colour…it's a very white university and I think Sussex is okay with that.'* Another commented: *'I think there's less gender sexuality discrimination than at many other universities including the staff body. But there is, perhaps, institutional racism in terms of who we employ.'* It is also possible that within particular groups, experiences differ. For example, although Sussex emerged from our data as broadly LGBTQIA+ inclusive, when we analysed the five words survey participants used to describe its culture, only heterosexual respondents tended to use mainly positive words. The responses of gay men tended to be neutral: but lesbians and bisexual people used more negative words. Transgender inclusion was

also raised as an issue: for instance, a survey respondent (413) wrote: *'I've had a transgender course mate tell me that he feels Sussex likes to say its a trans safe community, but he has never felt safe to use his gender specific toilet or to talk about the abuse he has faced.'*

Participants also felt that the university had not yet met their expectations around inclusion of neurodiverse and disabled people. Survey respondents with a disability used more negative words to describe Sussex's culture than those without, and a submission to our Wordpress site read:

> *It very much feels as though Sussex pays lip service to making things accessible for those with disabilities. From getting around campus to graduation, it feels like no consideration is made to ensure that events are supporting those with disabilities and ensuring they can access things without a disproportionate burden.*

A student with a disability reported that *'some people don't really want to associate with you if you are disabled',* recounting an experience in one of her first lectures in which *'when they were like "discuss in groups", everyone turned to each other and kind of left me on my own.'* All these data highlight the fact that 'diversity' can sometimes be referenced in apolitical ways which substitute concerns with power and privilege for a bland appreciation of 'difference' (Ahmed 2012). Our research challenges what diversity actually means at Sussex, and suggests that the discourse of Sussex radicalism may be hiding inequalities within the system.

Power and privilege

Power and privilege are interactional and relational issues deeply embedded in institutional cultures: this is by no means specific to Sussex, but was a strong theme in our data. For instance, a female academic commented: *'despite being a liberal, radical university, there's a real problem with the gender politics and the gender attitudes to women.'* A survey respondent (679) similarly remarked: *'especially challenging at Sussex are the large number of men who think that they are supportive of women at work, but who treat women differently in tangible and intangible ways.'* Our AI sessions frequently featured discussions of the 'old boys club' at Sussex. Participants also referred to specific issues such as promotions: a focus group participant said they were *'embarrassed by the fact that after thirty plus years of so called equal opportunity, the proportion of women who are Professors in this University is low.'* Conversely, a female member of professional services highlighted how the representation of women at the top does not necessarily improve the situation of those beneath.

> *Things like having portraits of women, like to me the first issues that need to be addressed are the real structural things…you know, if you're a female postdoctoral researcher who has a baby and then your contract can't be extended beyond the extent of the end of the research grant, to me that's much more of an issue than that person doesn't have a role model with a beautiful portrait.*

On a positive note, many of our participants noted that Sussex has good provision for staff and students with childcare responsibilities. Several had flexible working arrangements, and a female member of professional services commented that when she was first hired, '*the university was one of the very few employers that operated that kind of system at that time*.' However, some participants felt that while childcare responsibilities tended to be respected, responsibilities for other family members were not. A participant with caring responsibilities for his parents described a colleague '*in a similar position who left simply because her caring responsibilities for her parents were not recognised*.' It was also clear that arrangements were not consistent across the institution,

and that flexible working could be a privilege granted to some and not others. Sometimes this was down to interpersonal factors: in a male participant's experience, '*allowances [were] made for some people*', if they were '*favourites.*' In other situations, it was connected to structural power within the institution. While participants saw formal flexible working arrangements as relatively inaccessible to academics, professional services staff often resented the informal flexibility allowed at the higher grades. A female professional services manager reported

> *People feeling a little bit disgruntled, you know…If you have a Grade 7 that will phone in and say "I'm working from home today…I'm doing this…", everyone else that doesn't have that flexibility kind of thinks…"Okay…"…whether or not then you get the loyalty from your workforce, I think it starts to deteriorate a bit.*

Overall, our data presented a picture of an institution in which there are many forms of power and privilege, both within staff groupings and between different types of staff. Many participants thought that privilege allowed certain people to avoid accountability, whether for poor behaviour or poor performance. Academics felt that 'superstars' (referred to by a female academic as '*rocket ships'*) were allowed to get away with poor teaching or un-collegial behaviour. For instance, a focus group participant who had served on a promotions committee commented:

> *There's a lot on paper that isn't in practice. If people are an absolute bastard and aren't collegial and do very much crappy teaching, but they do brilliant research, they get promoted. If someone does his or her job really well in all other respects but doesn't have the time to do the brilliant research on top, they are really seen as a problem case.*

Another participant referred to '*people around who get away with outrageous things, actually, in terms of not contributing or not doing their jobs properly,*' and continued: '*I'm not saying that you ought to crack down on everybody, [but] maybe non-accountability does let bullies thrive.*' A female academic interviewee cited '*an unwillingness to tackle people who are these so-called research superstars and the way they behave, for fear that they may leave and take their money and their publications with them*.' Participants also saw this as gendered, with women struggling to prioritise research but also more likely to treat colleagues well. As a female member of professional services said: '*it's almost like if you're a really clever bloke, you're going to have to behave badly.*'

Our data also showed that women were contributing a disproportionate amount of the 'emotional labour' (Hochschild 1983) of the institution, especially in terms of pastoral care: an issue also raised in the Westmarland report (2016) and which is present in the broader sector (Gill, 2017). This was also evident in the uptake of our research: the fact that those who took part were predominantly women from professional services shows both gender and class privilege in terms of who is taking care of the institution. In Sara Ahmed's words (2017: 181), privilege can be a 'labour-saving device.' In considering what makes a privilege a privilege, Ahmed refers to 'the experiences you are protected from having; the thoughts you do not have to think'. Our research became a repository for the experiences and thoughts of people with less privilege at Sussex, less often, it provided a reflective space for those who had more. In one particular case, a male academic recognised during an interview that it was possible that he had '*exercised power in bad ways without realising it*', commenting that '*it's obviously the case that on most of this kind of power asymmetries, I've been on the privileged side*.' As Sussex evolves its culture, it will need to encourage more of this kind of reflection.

Many participants noted differences in how academics and professional services staff were treated by the university. As a survey respondent (123) put it:

> *When the university considers staff and caring for staff, it usually becomes quickly apparent that what they really mean is academic staff. When the university talks about being proud of the achievements of its female staff (Athena Swan), they only count academic women's achievement.*

Another survey respondent (80) highlighted the same issue around celebrating only academic women's achievements, and commented: '*there ain't no sisterhood here*.' Other issues were raised, such as the different holiday entitlements of academic and professional services staff, the use of first- or economy-class travel depending on rank, the allocation of smaller desks to professional services staff, and their lack of progression and career development. A survey respondent (95) wrote: '*I do not think academics realise how stuck most of us feel. We are not second-class citizens and we have career aspirations too.*'

Some of our academic participants suggested that 'admin' should be left to administrators while faculty staff were left to conduct research. Although these comments highlight on-going issues with balancing academic workloads (do Mar Pereira, 2016), they also perhaps indicate that some forms of work (and some staff) are valued more than others. This was painfully apparent in a story recounted by a professional services interviewee, who had been told by an academic that '*he provided more value to the University by walking across a room than I did in my entire career.*' Although this is an extreme example, a sense of superiority or '*academic snobbery*' (survey respondent 315) was more generally identified in the way that some academics related to professional services and SEF staff. Our AI participants felt that there was an attachment to titles (such as Dr and Professor) in the institution, and a perception that it was 'rude' to ignore status, which reinforced class and other privileges.[13] 'Gradism', meaning a lack of respect for staff on lower grades, was also named and discussed by AI participants and survey respondents. For example, one survey respondent (71) remarked that the university management '*engaged much more with staff at higher grades than those at lower ones*', and another (315) felt that staff in grades 2-4 were often '*looked down on*'. As a third (51) put it, '*a greater respect for all colleagues within the university is needed, whatever their division or grade.*'

Participants felt that class was very much unspoken at Sussex but also very present. For instance, a male academic with a working class background commented that '*no-one likes to talk about class*', but felt that '*the kind of…the assumption people have about the amount of privilege they deserve is very, very interesting.*' He also saw class as an issue that '*cut across*' gender, reporting that he'd seen '*women with very privileged class backgrounds, academics, treat female support staff appallingly.*' A SEF manager similarly said:

> *When we have problems with complaints from our staff, it's always about academics, treating them as if they're servants. We are not your servants but we are here to serve, and it's the way that academics speak to our staff as if they are servants and it is that level and I have to say it is that level who treat people like shit.*

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[13] We do not want to make assumptions about the class background of any participants: however, we acknowledge that academics, professional services and SEF staff differ in terms of career progression, financial rewards, and institutional status, and may be perceived to be from particular social classes even when they do not see themselves as such.

These 'master/servant' dynamics were also identified in senior academics' relationships with colleagues on fixed-term contracts, and professional services and SEF relations with students. For instance, an academic commented on *'how some students relate to the people in the office downstairs. They talk to them as though they're…like it's "Upstairs Downstairs" come back to life.'* SEF staff reported similar experiences, and a SEF focus group participant said that cleaners in particular were treated with little consideration:

> *It's the students coming up that are going to be the next decade's academia that come in with that attitude, they really do. The first thing you teach your children is to go to the toilet, pull the chain, you wash your hands and you go out the door. It seems that as soon as you come through the university gates that goes completely out the window. What is that? What is so difficult with getting your waste product down the pan?*

Like the university's demographics, privilege and its effects were seen as a challenge to Sussex's radical reputation. As a survey respondent (348) put it: *'we promote progressive values in the wide world, but this has sometimes been slow to translate into how we treat each other within the institution.'* Participants from less privileged groups, such professional services and SEF staff, women, BAME people, people with disabilities, those with caring responsibilities and early career academics (and of course, these categories overlapped) found it difficult to hold colleagues or the institution accountable. There was reluctance amongst these groups to *'stick their head[s] above the parapet'* (a phrase used by several focus group participants) for fear of *'getting shot'* (a phrase used by one). This was also connected to Sussex's history of top-down management, restructuring and redundancy, which we will return to later. For example, a male academic said: *'if there are redundancies going on around you, people are less inclined to speak out.'*

3d. 'Them and us': processes of splitting

Although our participants generally experienced Sussex as a pleasant place to be, the institution also has dynamics of power and privilege which cause problems for some students and staff. Another key institutional dynamic is 'splitting', which is common to many workplaces but particularly those where there is a sense of powerlessness and limited freedom and trust (Diamond and Allcorn 2003: 500). This is a process by which members of an organisation think about others in terms of binary categories, such as 'good or bad, all or nothing, enemy or ally' (Diamond and Allcorn 2003: 500). At Sussex these splits appear in a number of ways: between the Executive Group and the rest of the university community; between academic and professional services staff; between SEF staff and others; between higher and lower grades of staff; and between staff and students. Splitting is linked to processes of Othering, for instance the construction of protesting students as a 'mob', or the vilification of all staff in Sussex House. It can also produce anxiety and fear, caused by a lack of trust, which contracts the space and reduces the energy for inquiry, dialogue, and collaboration (Cavicchia, 2010).

When our participants referred to the University Executive Group (frequently called 'the Centre'), they often described Sussex House as the place where all decision-making occurred. They saw this as an inaccessible 'fortress' of senior management, despite the fact that many professional services staff also work in this building. Throughout our data, there was a sense that 'they' (meaning the

Executive Group) were not like 'us' (meaning students and staff).[14] For instance, a senior faculty member described Sussex House as a *'different culture'*, reporting that they had to *'dress in a bureaucratic way to be able to deal with Sussex House…even to get through the front door.'* A survey respondent (477) described the Executive Group as 'aloof' and in our interviews and focus groups they were occasionally referred to using pejorative terms. A sense of 'them and us' in organisations may intensify during times of disharmony and change, with binary thinking becoming more prevalent due to the need for certainty and safety (Barnes, 1984). Our data suggested that this may have happened (or been exacerbated) at Sussex because of its recent history. As one female professional services manager put it, *'there is a cynicism about senior management, and there's…I think there's a 'them and us', you know, Sussex House is perceived as this place full of faceless bureaucrats, and terrible you know, bullying management.'* While this may have been at least partly alleviated by the more consultative, open approach adopted by the new Vice Chancellor, some splitting may also be in evidence around the 2018 industrial action (and this needs to be understood).

Our data also showed divides between academics and professional services staff, which related to class and status, as described in the previous section. Sometimes this involved material differences in income and treatment, and sometimes a perception that the two groups were from different social strata. For instance, one female academic commented that *'the academics and the professional services staff look different, work in different bits of the university and therefore feel culturally apart from each other.'* A focus group participant referred to *'a lack of communication between the schools and the professional services…which is probably down to hierarchy.'* In our AI discussions, the idea of 'parallel universes' was used to describe academics and professional services staff. Participants also thought the siloed structure of the university (which we discuss later) contributed to divides between academics and professional services divisions, as well as between Schools, with particular parts of the university positioned as 'enemies' in relation to others.

An estrangement from SEF was also reflected in some participant comments and discussed in our AI groups. SEF was mentioned negatively by some survey participants: for example, one (321) commented that the university *'need[ed] to get rid of SEF'* because they were *'impacting badly on both student and staff satisfaction'*. Another (251) wrote that SEF were *'performing badly and there should be serious questions asked about value for money.'* These comments, however, should be read alongside our other data on the relationships between university staff (especially academics) and students and SEF staff, which are hierarchical and often politicised. One SEF focus group participant commented that the university was *'a place with very high expectations'* and described the institution's culture as *'a bit obstructive'*. Statements by other SEF staff suggested that opposition to outsourcing could sometimes be expressed as hostility towards SEF workers (especially cleaners). As another SEF focus group participant said:

> there are certain departments on campus who need to work with us rather than almost against us. There is one department in mind - they will look for a file or they'll plant something like a piece of paper on the floor and if the cleaner doesn't pick it up there's a phone call there and there's a complaint.

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[14] Because so few members of the Executive Group participated in our data collection, we are unable to say whether this sense is shared: however, the defensiveness we have identified in Sussex's recent history suggests that it has been.

A participant from professional services had also seen *'a grown person shoving handtowels down a toilet to create a problem so they could phone up SEF and say they weren't looking after the toilets properly and there was an issue.'*

The final major split at Sussex at present appears to be a political one. There was a sense among some of our participants that Sussex's 'radical' political culture positioned different viewpoints as threatening, leading to what one survey respondent (132) called *'them-and-us debates or arguments'*. Other participants identified *'open hostility to debate'* (in the words of survey respondent 81). A third survey respondent (517) said: '*I know a lot of people who feel that if they are open with their views they will get shut down*' and a fourth (370) identified a *'pressure to think a particular way that our students can find a little alienating.'* Comments such as these existed mainly in our survey data, and emerged strongly when responses from white men were coded. It is possible that the survey method offered these participants a safer space to air their views; the gender composition and politics of our project team (we are all women who are open about our left-wing and feminist perspectives) may have made more conservative participants feel less inclined to volunteer for our other, more intimate methods. It is likely that in split environments, there may be reluctance to engage in what one of our survey participants (508) called *'healthy debate'* because of defensiveness and anxiety (we will return to both of these later). As well as creating difficult relationships, this may not be conducive to embracing different political views.

Difficult relationships
In environments where splitting occurs, difficult relationships can easily develop due to a lack of trust (Roderick and Tyler, 1996). Bullying is both produced by splitting and produces it: this can become a vicious circle (White, 2004). This perhaps partly explained some of the relational difficulties our participants described, framed particularly by splits between 'managers' and staff. For instance, one focus group participant referred to, *'a hell of a lot of really serious bullying and some seriously bad behaviour by managers.'* 'Bullying managers' were a key theme in our survey, and one respondent (252) felt these dynamics had '*become endemic to the Sussex culture.'* In some comments, 'managers' were undefined; others were more specific and referenced the Executive Group. For instance, one survey respondent (186) said: *'the executive team need to look at their own culture of bullying. Once this is addressed a more friendly and supportive culture can develop.'* It is tempting to put these statements down to Sussex's history, but some participants were explicit about the continuation of these dynamics. For instance, a survey respondent (273) said: '*[recent] issues have not been addressed. Staff in vulnerable roles are not listened to. There is widespread bullying and scapegoating. It is an open secret.'* Another (688) commented: *'staff here, including current senior management staff members, know they can get away with appalling and demeaning behaviour.'*

Sussex's relational environment was discussed at length in our AI sessions, and participants in all our methods reported experiences of unacceptable behaviours such as shouting, which appeared to be normalised in some parts of the university. For instance, a male academic recalled asking 'is this normal?' in response to being shouted at, and being told *'oh, it tends to be a very Sussex thing.'* A female academic reported a story about a '*colleague that got really, really shouted at by a member of staff, who then turned up an hour later with a box of chocolates'*, commenting, '*I mean, that's classic domestic violence behaviour, isn't it?*' Another female academic reported that a female

colleague had 'screamed abuse into [her] face for an hour', and recalled going into '*a kind of altered state I think. I just kind of thought, "right, this isn't happening*." This description of entering into an '*altered state*' echoes the dissociative mechanisms of victims of abuse or trauma, whereby the mind detaches from reality for protection (Classen et al., 1993). This participant's story, along with the observation from her colleague about '*classic domestic violence behaviour*', suggests that these incidents are serious even though they have been categorised as '*a very Sussex thing*'.

Social power relations such as class, race and gender also shape bullying: and although men were the majority of alleged perpetrators in our data, women were also named fairly frequently, which shows how these categories intersect. Women associated with bullying were often in positions of power and privilege. For instance, a junior female academic referred to a female colleague, a senior member of professional services, who '*is woman who has a lot of power and who…I know that people have complained about her, but their complaints have sort of been dismissed, and then they got into trouble for complaining.*' A professional services participant reported an experience with her manager, who she felt had disempowered her in various ways. '*I've tried to raise it with her,*' she said, '*and she doesn't listen to anything that I say. She just talks over the top of me.*' There is a well-established literature on how powerful women are more often seen as aggressive and judged negatively than similarly positioned men (Brescoll and Uhlmann, 2008). This was acknowledged by one of our participants, a female academic who said: '*we blame women much more, because women, in a probably unconscious way, but you know, they're like our mothers*.' However, many of the incidents reported to us gave genuine cause for concern.

Many participants understood the relational environment at Sussex in terms of family dynamics: these were most commonly in the parent-child configuration (and this was frequently discussed in AI sessions). There was also a sense of siblings '*bickering*' (in the words of one focus group participant) in some aspects of the culture. Another focus group participant framed Sussex's 'shouting' culture as a toddler or teenage tantrum, saying: '*it's interesting when you pull someone up for shouting, they often don't realise they're shouting, and they stop, you know? They've just got excited because they can't get what they want and they start shouting.*' In our AI groups, participants specifically explored the practice of micro managing rather than delegating. Micro-management can contribute to infantilisation in the workplace as it treats staff as 'ignorant, childlike, or stupid' (Leskinen and Cortina 2014: 115). Top-down management was also seen as infantilising: for instance, a focus group participant highlighted a '*just do it!*' attitude in Sussex's culture, and saw this as an example of '*treating grownups like delinquent children*.' Infantilisation was also linked to secrecy, especially around change processes but also at everyday operational levels. The latter dynamic particularly affected professional services staff, especially those in lower grades. For instance, a female member of professional services described this with the phrase, '*Oh you're not Grade 7, you don't need to know*.'

'Hierarchical' was the most commonly used negative word to describe Sussex's culture in our survey. Some participants experienced a static and 'stuck' childlike position in this hierarchy (we will return to 'stuckness' later), where they felt unable to grow professionally and where risk-taking was discouraged for fear of failure. Again, this was particularly common amongst professional services staff, who were more likely to describe Sussex as hierarchical than others. As one survey respondent (272) put it: '*staff at the operational level need to be empowered, not constrained, and need to be*

consulted, listened to and supported when they voice their opinions.' As we have already noted, there was also a great deal of commentary about the lack of career progression and development in professional services, in stark contrast to the accelerated progress of certain members of the academic system. Some participants also felt that students were infantilised at Sussex: for instance, a focus group participant said:

> *I find it really problematic. Why should they be treated as children when they're nineteen, twenty…Eighteen, they're adults, you know?' We've got the responsibility for making [their] journey one in which they can go out into the world equipped with all the resilience and skills. And I don't think we are necessarily equipping them with those things.*

It can be helpful to view relationships in an organisation or institution within the framework of family systems theory: thinking about the way that people behave, and the power dynamics that exist between them as a living system, much like a family unit (Bowen, 1978). In this unit, members take on and play out particular roles. In our data and especially in our AI sessions, a parent-child dynamic was most associated with relations between the Executive Group and the rest of the community, linked mainly to Sussex's recent history. When leaders feel unable to resolve threats or risks, they may transmit or 'project' problems on to employees (Kott, 2014: 77). This is similar to how, in a family, parents may use scapegoating or blaming to project problems they are unable to resolve on to a child. Alternatively (or at the same time), employees may expect their leaders to be perfect in much the same way as children do their parents, forgetting they are human beings. This, in turn, can lead to leaders becoming too concerned with hiding vulnerabilities (Carucci, 2015). These dynamics can create a 'blame culture' which may persist after anxiety has passed, or even after a leader has changed (Kott, 2014: 78). A 'blame culture' was certainly in evidence at Sussex, and we will return to this later.

In this area, as in others, our data are complex: despite the prevalence of splitting, some participants who described difficult relationships empathised with colleagues they had struggled with and with the Executive Group. Workload pressure, a lack of suitable learning and development opportunities, poor channels of accountability and a lack of good quality supervision, were cited as significant factors in creating relationship problems. For instance, as one male academic said, '*it goes partly with being an academic organisation, most of the senior management haven't had significant management training*.' A member of professional services staff similarly commented:

> *I think, genuinely, that there's a huge management training piece to be done across the University. And that is fundamental. So I think people need to be able to manage staff. And I'm not just talking about performance management in a negative way; I'm talking about bringing staff on in a very positive way. I don't think people have had any clarity about what the expectations are on them in doing their jobs.*

There was also an awareness that difficult relationships were not unique to Sussex and occurred across the higher education sector: this is supported by a wealth of research (see for example Keashly and Neuman, 2013). While we are not suggesting that bullying should not be tackled, this empathy can be seen as one of the strengths of Sussex's culture, which can be built on as it evolves.

In terms of accountability, it was generally felt that personal difficulties and bullying were not effectively addressed at Sussex (this links to our previous discussion of privilege). Although the institution was described as 'supportive' in our survey, a lack of care was reported in interviews and

focus groups: this complexity in our data may suggest that those volunteering for interviews and focus groups were more likely to have had difficult experiences with the institution. It may also reflect the higher representation of students in the survey: our participants reported especially poor support for staff struggling with interpersonal or emotional difficulties, in contrast to the excellent support provided for students. For instance, a female academic commented: *'it seems from my perspective that we look after the students but maybe not so well the staff.'* A member of professional services observed that colleagues' attempts to resolve difficulties often became a triangle: *'the recurring thing is them bouncing around from when the Staff Welfare Officer was there, to Occupational Health to HR – between those three places, with nobody taking responsibility for helping them'*. This refers to a type of gridlock (which we discuss later) in which the only viable options are to continue to tolerate unacceptable behaviour, or leave.

Similar to some of our survey respondents, AI participants identified formal support mechanisms and supportive individual colleagues at Sussex. However, they nevertheless saw and experienced the institution as often unsupportive. This manifested in different ways and was linked to 'sink or swim' attitudes, high pressure and high performance expectations, and blame (which we discuss later). Participants also felt that despite the availability of support, needing this support could be seen as failing, as shameful and as a sign of weakness. This was intensified for participants marginalised across more than one identity category, and questions arose here about who was seen as more deserving of help. High levels of self-management and hiding vulnerabilities were outcomes of these elements of culture. This mirrors research in other institutions, which has suggested that support structures and policies are insufficient: there is a need for open dialogue around work-related problems and feelings in a climate which understands these as normal rather than pathologising them (see for example Obholzer and Roberts, 1994).

Participants also identified a need to provide impartial mediation, since escalation to complaints procedures or grievances was commonly the only viable option. In cases where mediation had been carried out, it was usually by a member of the department in question or a representative of Human Resources. There was therefore often a clear bias or agenda in favour of de-escalating issues, and participants felt their concerns had been closed down or dismissed. For instance, a member of professional services staff reported being told by a representative of Human Resources that any mediation would need to start from the assumption that her manager (who she was in an informal dispute with) was right. Again, this is not specific to Sussex: these experiences reflect how the politics of 'complaint' play out in higher education institutions in general. For Ahmed (2017), embracing the opportunity to support those who complain and learn from these incidents is what distinguishes an institution invested in cultural change from one that is not.

Anxiety and fear in the system

Bullying needs further consideration around the emotions it creates and reflects. Anxiety and fear are key among these, and these appeared throughout our dataset. Anxiety is an everyday emotion that often exists in higher education (Gill, 2009: 4): although it is not possible to measure whether it is worse at Sussex than elsewhere, its dominance in our data caused us concern. We interpret bullying as both producing anxiety and fear *and* being produced by them. Some of our participants reflected, with empathy, that senior staff or leaders under pressure could project that on to those below them in the hierarchy. As one of our interviewees, a female academic, put it:

> *Professors are under pressure. What's driving it is the machinery to get papers published. But not only that, [it's] their own inadequacies and their own insecurities about making mistakes in a culture that's not very forgiving. So they put pressure on people further down.*

Our AI discussions also covered issues around some staff bearing the brunt of others' anxieties. While we do not intend to excuse bad behaviour, it is important to recognise the relational effects of competitive, marketised higher education and the way it constructs both institutional and individual 'success'. For leaders, this can produce a compulsion to make the university appear perfect (Phipps 2018), while for academics it shapes what one of our survey respondents (250) described as '*the constant pressures to perform e.g. you are only as good as your current research grant*'.

Junior and precariously employed academic colleagues were particularly likely to experience anxiety. This was often to do with workloads and conditions: for instance, one focus group participant recalled that when they were employed as an Associate Tutor they were,

> *basically, just left on my own to face everything. There was no support. At that time, there wasn't any official training either. I think one of the hardest things for me, being in that junior role was knowing that, first of all, I'd been offered more work than I could probably physically do. I took it on because I didn't know any better at that stage in my career, but the department offering me it knew. Do you know what I mean? They knew they were offering me too much. So, once that, kind of, realisation dawned on me, I felt really exploited, but then also, you know, when I was saying to them, "this is physically impossible. I'm struggling with this," I basically got back, "you just have to do it."*

Survey responses also revealed problems with academic workloads. For example, one respondent (40) said, '*I don't feel the University does enough to help ensure staff time is distributed fairly across research, teaching and administration*', and another (290) noted that there is a '*tendency to undervalue the frontline work of delivering teaching and doing research*'. This is not specific to Sussex: increased pressure, hard-to-manage workloads and precarity are problems sector-wide (Kinman and Wray, 2013). However, this does not mean that staff should not be better supported.

Professional services staff also reported anxiety, exacerbated by hierarchies which meant they often felt 'not good enough' in comparison to academics. In our AI sessions, participants from professional services discussed being intimidated by working with 'clever' people. We found it telling that these intelligent, thoughtful and capable colleagues located 'cleverness' outside themselves. There was also a great deal of discussion about 'imposter syndrome' and feelings of worthlessness, from both professional services colleagues and academics. These feelings were gendered, with women more likely to experience them than men. Although academics in our dataset were more likely to report feelings of overwork than professional services colleagues, this may reflect institutional dynamics rather than actual workloads. In other words, professional services colleagues may feel less able to

speak up about their workloads due to the hierarchies and differential treatment we have identified in other sections of this report.

As we have discussed above, in a family systems analysis anxiety is closely related to blame. Blame is both an effect of anxiety and produces it: this cycle is in evidence at Sussex, and can be exacerbated in a culture in which splitting is commonplace (Fotaki and Hyde, 2015). In our AI sessions, participants described negativity from both previous and current Executive Groups about the state of the institution. They also identified a 'blame culture' at Sussex, in which staff were fearful of getting things wrong and as a result did not take initiative. In our survey data, blame was also a strong theme and was linked to staff not taking responsibility. For instance, one respondent (164) wrote: *'unfortunately, there are some senior managers who blame, bully and harass their staff. Many talented people have left, and those that remain feel demotivated, disempowered and reluctant to show any initiative, for fear of being criticized and belittled.'* One of our focus group participants similarly described a *'culture of fear'*, which meant that staff *'would not take initiative'*. She also used the phrase *'finger pointing'*, and felt that because of the lack of support in the institution, it was often easier to blame people after they had made mistakes rather than to mentor them in their roles. *'Rather than telling someone that they're going to trip over something and helping them to avoid that obstacle, they'll wait till you've tripped over and say "well, you've fallen over, haven't you? Shouldn't have done it like that should you?" So it's kind of very negative.'*

This 'blame culture' was also associated with defensive modes of engagement, and especially the history of *'management secrecy and defensiveness'* (in the words of survey participant 671) at Sussex. Again, blame was seen as being produced by defensiveness and producing it, with staff who felt targeted and blamed by leaders going into retreat mode. For instance, a female professional services colleague commented that staff could be *'very protective about the way they do things'*, describing *'a lot of defensive behaviour, which is unhealthy'*, and a female academic described her department as an *'environment that [was] very defended.'* Fear of being targeted and blamed was also seen as having a silencing effect: our AI participants especially discussed this. In an interview, a female academic explained this dynamic as follows:

> *If you fail, you are not only personally vulnerable, but your unit may be vulnerable. So there isn't a sense that people and units are learning processes, that sometimes make mistakes. So what people do is they have to cover up mistakes, they have to defend the unit.*

For some of our participants, fear was palpable in their working environments. For instance, one of our focus group participants identified a *'fear culture of the hierarchy'* which meant that her office, *'more often than not, work[ed] in complete silence.'* Uncertainty coupled with low levels of trust can produce deep anxiety and fear in organisations (Laloux, 2014), and our data suggested that despite recent improvements in transparency and communication, individuals and sometimes whole units at Sussex continue to feel vulnerable to changes they have not been warned about or may have no control over. As a focus group participant said: *'there's still that, kind of, almost fear of not sticking your head above the parapet in case, you know, a spot light gets shone upon you.'*

3e. Silos, gridlock and the Sussex Way

Sussex has a reputation for interdisciplinarity and inclusion. It is also physically situated on a beautiful campus in the South Downs National Park. These factors both imply a huge potential for the institution to form a coherent and cohesive community, with a shared vision. However, our data suggested that at present this potential has not been realised. The most common description our participants used for the structure of the university was 'siloed' - in both a bureaucratic and a physical sense. The words 'villages' and 'islands' were also used to describe the university's different units, and many participants felt that they operated, as one put it, in their '*own patch*' in a fragmented institutional structure. For instance, a female member of professional services said: '*so we're like little different islands. So I currently live on [names unit] island, not part of the [names another unit]. And you feel weird going to a different island.*' A female academic similarly said:

> So we do our health and safety differently, we do our disaster management differently, we have different policies we have different cultures. So, each building has its own culture. And there's a lot of buildings on campus. So maybe we're…I don't know…France? And Sussex House is America…and….[laughs]…and we don't all talk the same language I'm afraid.

Most participants saw siloisation as either caused or exacerbated by the 2009 restructuring which created the current Schools and professional services divisions. For example, a survey respondent (328) described a '*legacy of silo mentality*' from this period which had '*not been fully addressed*'. This was echoed by another respondent (365) who felt that since the 2009 restructure, '*It feels as though departments are always in competition for resources and ownership, which creates an unpleasant atmosphere*'. Similarly, one of our focus group participants said: '*it's almost as if it's competitive and I think some of that has to do with budgets and things like that*.' These quotes, and others, linked siloisation to a mentality of separateness and competition, rather than collectivity and collaboration, as either its cause or effect (or both). A female professional services manager, who saw Sussex as a '*very siloed organisation*', commented that '*it doesn't think in an organisation-wide way…It doesn't think about working across different teams, across different divisions, across different Schools, bringing academics and professionals together…It's a very, very siloed mentality.*' This is intimately related to the splitting, anxiety and defensiveness we have already described, and participants also felt that at a practical level, siloisation produced inefficiency. For instance, as a female academic put it, '*what happens if that one person goes under the bus? And there's nothing on shared files?*' There's nothing…It's just lacking that…There's just no sort of systems around anything*.'

In all organisations, silos and segregating lines impact on the capacity to have common purpose and a collective sensibility. Professional silos can impede knowledge sharing and collaboration (Bundred, 2006), and cause oppositional working practices (Shirey, 2006). Participants across all our data types reported feeling disconnected from the wider university community at Sussex, and a '*lack of common purpose/pulling together*' (as expressed by survey respondent 269). This may seem to contradict the idea of Sussex as a 'friendly' institution, which was also dominant in our data: however, there are important differences between 'friendliness' as a demeanor and collectivity as a practice. 'Friendliness' can be understood as an interpersonal dynamic between individuals or small groups. Whilst individuals or departments may be experienced as 'friendly,' however, this does not necessarily translate to collectivity or a feeling that the goals and work of staff at the university are directed towards a common purpose (Parkin-Gounelas, 2012: 3). One female academic referred to

her department as 'alienated', attributing this to 'a very hierarchical management structure and a lack of accountability and transparency.' It is one thing to treat individuals with friendliness, and quite another to work towards a shared goal. It is also possible that a 'friendly' surface environment can conceal inequalities, or that leaders can use the practice or idea of 'friendliness' to hide agendas they are pursuing which may be harmful to their staff (this point adapts Pedwell's insights on empathy – see 2012).

Some participants associated a lack of collectivity at Sussex with the current structures and practices of the higher education sector more broadly: this connection is also evidenced by a wealth of literature (see for example Naidoo and Williams, 2015). For instance, as one survey respondent (099) put it, 'too much competition and performance accountability measures are counterproductive to the development of a collective culture and individual well-being.' Un-collegial behaviour was also linked to anxiety and stress: for instance, a male academic who had been in a leadership role described,

> People having various types of burnout that manifest themselves in many different ways. And people becoming very disheartened with their job, at all levels…and then becoming very …what is it…what's the word…very difficult really… "Oh but I only got twenty beans for doing that and I need thirty beans for that." And it's a sign of people actually being overloaded.

Many of our participants felt that creating more shared spaces in the institution would help to create a more collective culture. For instance, a female academic thought the university needed 'more places where people felt like they were themselves…where they felt they can be open…have friendly conversations.' A survey respondent (226) similarly felt that the university needed 'anything to enable an easier informal mix of academic and professional services, school people and people from the "centre", students and staff.'

Gridlock and the Sussex Way
Sussex's current siloed structure may also be a significant factor in the production of institutional gridlock. By gridlock we mean a situation in which movement forward is difficult or impossible, which happens in a siloed structure in which communication and collaboration is inhibited (Bundred, 2006) and which was a key theme in our data. Our AI and focus group participants discussed various forms of gridlock: professional services colleagues were the majority of participants in these data types, so it is possible that these staff experience more gridlock and academic staff have more freedom to move. Gridlock was also produced by institutional hierarchies in which staff were not given the authority necessary to achieve elements of their roles: a female academic referred to 'people sometimes just going into retreat mode or pushing back themselves, but not actually being able to engage in making things work.' She also felt that in some situations staff avoided taking responsibility 'because they weren't being given any authority…I could see it all the way down the system – the sort of lack of empowerment and lack of engagement'.

Again, this sense of institutional 'stuckness' was particularly prevalent in professional services where, as we have highlighted, there is little career progression. This seemed to contribute to a situation in which there was also little delegated authority. For instance, a female member of professional services commented:

> I think I'm totally shocked at how authority is delegated upwards and nobody has any kind of sense that they can take decisions. And I think it's very sort of disempowering, and so it creates a very, I think a quite unique culture, where decisions don't get made, people don't

feel they have authority to take any decisions. In very sort of really kind of simple processes within their departments or their organisations. And I think ultimately that makes people's roles very, very… not satisfying.

A survey respondent (212) similarly felt that Sussex's culture '*breeds mediocrity. Staff aren't supported and developed enough to want to shine. They either get frustrated and leave or stay and lose motivation*'. Another (142), in answer to the question 'how could we enhance Sussex culture?' answered '*allow/encourage people to use their talents and enthusiasms in their jobs, by ending the top-down, multiple senior sign-off culture*'. Gridlock may be produced by anxiety around taking initiative (and potentially being blamed for failing), and was also a significant factor in the production of anxiety. Some participants highlighted a sense of constant crisis, and often used the term '*firefighting*.' This was also connected to bullying: some staff felt that in order to get things done managers would violate their boundaries, either through increasing workloads to unmanageable levels or using inappropriate management techniques.

Research also suggests that when staff are disempowered they may disengage from the institution and its mission (see for example Shaw, 2002): this may be a contributor to gridlock. This was reflected in our data: for example, a survey respondent (376) noted that '*frustration at the inability to shape their own department grows in faculty the longer they are at Sussex. As a result I see a large number of completely disengaged older faculty who do not care about anything and show little initiative.*' This was also reported in relation to professional services staff, and SEF. For instance, a female member of professional services said: '*[SEF staff] do feel disengaged. I think also they don't feel empowered. And I think a lot of them feel they haven't got a voice.*' Our AI participants similarly cited a sense of 'paralysis' caused by top-down leadership and institutional uncertainty, linked to a lack of initiative and a refusal to speak out. They saw themselves as institutional 'change agents', but were frustrated by the immovability of the environments around them. During these discussions, the idea of the 'Sussex Way' was often introduced.

We do not have one definition of the Sussex Way, as our participants described and related to it differently. It is an idea which has a longer history than some of the key events in our data, pre-dating the previous Executive Group. For some participants it was connected with Sussex's earliest days and represented pride in the institution's radical reputation. For instance, a female academic said: '*you see it when you go to conferences…[external colleagues] have a clear sense that we do something that's a bit kind of different…and they have a sense that it's perhaps more politically engaged.*' However, and more negatively, others experienced the Sussex Way as a 'harking back' to previous radicalism which prevented positive change in the present. As a male academic commented: '*and there is this notion of the Sussex way, which is very good and has some very good things, like you know, Global Studies. But also, it has the…that's the root of the conservatism.*' This links to our earlier discussion of how Sussex's 'radical' reputation may be masking inequalities in the institution. It positions the Sussex Way as less neutral, as a discourse used to actively maintain privileges and power relations. Echoing this, a focus group participant said they had seen '*committees where things are…really configured so that they're less controversial, and you might not be empowered to do anything about them and if you raise a stink about it, it will come back on you. We've got a name for that at our school, we call it the Sussex Way.*'

More frequently, participants understood the Sussex Way bureaucratically as a sense of 'stuckness' related to not getting things done: this is intimately connected with gridlock. In this sense the Sussex Way was not a positive attribute but a discourse of 'not doing' - as a survey respondent (620) commented, *"sludge" is my way of describing that getting anything done encounters dense resistance.*' A female academic similarly said: *'I came in…people were quite stuck in the way they did things. It was very difficult for me to implement change because, I don't know, there was this Sussex Way, which was so dominant – "this is the way we do things round here".'* This comment understands the Sussex Way as a defence of complex, parochial and old-fashioned bureaucratic processes, and was echoed by other participants. For instance, as one female member of professional services said: *'they're like "I'm sorry but that isn't the Sussex way," and that it's not the "Sussex Way" and everything is all done "the Sussex way".*' She defined this 'way' as a system characterised by *'chasing bits of paper round and….the craziness…this piece of paper goes via internal mail, this piece of paper doesn't go at all….this piece of paper is a scan.*'

The Sussex Way was seen by some participants as an impediment to institutional development because it created, in the words of a female member of professional services manager, '*a real resistance to change.*' This suggests that the 'not doing' at operational levels could potentially also occur at strategic ones. A focus group participant put it like this:

> *I think my personal experience is when I first started at Sussex, I tried to do something about it and tried to take policies out and was immediately, my questions were shut down, saying, no, no, you're going off piste, get on script, this is, as you say, not the Sussex way, and eventually I just thought, whatever, you know, you've only got so much energy you can spend as a person.*

The idea that things at Sussex are '*the way they are'* was a key theme in our survey data. For instance, one respondent (24) identified '*an unwillingness to make change from senior staff.*' Similar points were made in our interviews and focus groups, and there was a sense that middle management and senior faculty are particularly resistant to strategic changes. In many organisations, this resistance is associated with anxiety attached to risk-taking (Borgelt and Falk, 2007: 132), or fear around losing something of perceived value, such as authority (Nevis, 1998). This was also present in our data and suggests that perhaps authority is jealously guarded in a situation in which it is not often delegated downwards. As one male professional services colleague said: '*I think there's a layer of management that are fearful of change, and actively oppose it. But also, where that change comes from…the change is perceived as a challenge to their authority.'* The Sussex Way, in its various forms, is an obstacle to change at Sussex: however, our data also showed that staff are critical of it, which suggests that this obstacle could be overcome.

4. Movement and change

Our data reveal the existence of institutional 'wounds' at Sussex from previous periods in its history, especially the shift in management style after 2007 which happened alongside the neoliberalisation of many English universities (Naidoo and Williams, 2015). When past experiences remain figural in institutions as 'unfinished business', it is difficult to cultivate capacity for transformative change (Laloux 2014). It is important to recognise the extent of 'unfinished business' at Sussex, and to explore, acknowledge and learn from the past. It is also important to critically engage with Sussex's history of and current claims to 'radicalism', especially considering the demographics of the university and the complex forms of power and privilege which operate in it. Although inequalities and power relations are present throughout the higher education sector, Sussex may be at risk of complacency in this area due to some of the discourses which circulate around the institution. When power and privilege are not acknowledged, organisations may inadvertently become part of the wider systems of oppression that exist in society (Hill Collins 2012), even when these are systems they overtly oppose. If radicalism is being evoked as an empty category at Sussex and is in fact more myth than reality, this speaks to a fundamental incongruence in the system. If what is stated to be true does not fit what people know to be true this can reduce trust within organisations, leading to disconnection and dysfunction (Schein 2004).

At present, Sussex's culture is characterised by divisions between types of people and roles, and between those in different positions of power. It also shows a tendency to 'split' people, events and politics into binary categories, which creates and reflects a sense of 'them and us' and a lack of trust. Indeed, some of our participants' comments may embody this practice of splitting, especially the framing of the previous Executive Group as 'bad' and the current one as 'good.' This creates risks: that staff and students could reframe the current Executive Group as 'bad' when mistakes are made and complexities emerge; and/or that this Group could frame their predecessors as 'bad' and themselves as 'good', which would inhibit critical reflection on their own actions. Splitting can be seen as a defensive response to the stress, anxiety and fear which exists in the higher education sector more broadly at present, especially linked to marketisation. At Sussex, it is also related to the recent history of change implemented without proper communication or consultation. It is also possible that when radicalism is performed at surface levels, this can lead to a tendency to split the world into enemies and allies rather than to engage with empathy and nuance.

Sussex at present is also a siloed institution, and this exacerbates splitting and creates various forms of gridlock. Changes made by the previous Executive Group created a devolved structure, which fragmented units yet did not give them sufficient autonomy. However, gridlock at Sussex may have a longer history, evidenced by the existence of the 'Sussex Way' as a practice and discourse which both enables and excuses it. Silos and gridlock make change very difficult to implement, and may also mean that as the institution changes at strategic levels, the work of adapting the capillary systems below is not fully done. This raises questions about the role of learning at Sussex when it comes to change, which we will return to in our recommendations. As Sussex develops, there is a need to hold a balance between healthy devolution and a strong structural and communicative framework, which will enable staff and students to connect and collaborate.

The themes we have identified in our report are challenging. However, similar issues are in evidence across the higher education sector, and our data also showed that Sussex is at an advantage because staff and students have empathy for each other, a passion for the institution, a commitment to cultural change, and the energy to achieve it. The level of participation in our project reveals hope amongst staff and students that by speaking out and sharing perspectives and experiences, the institution might evolve. Participants in the action inquiry in particular showed tremendous levels of goodwill, although there are questions to be raised here around who is doing this institutional 'housekeeping', as discussed earlier in our report. Many of the dynamics at Sussex are cyclical: for instance, the relationships between bullying and splitting, anxiety and blame, fear and gridlock. A lack of trust underpins them all, and through increasing trust between people at different levels and in different parts of the institution, Sussex has an opportunity to create virtuous circle of change. Cultural evolution can increase trust in an institution (Lines et al., 2005), and this can also lead to employees feeling more positive about their ability to affect change (Neves and Caetano, 2006).

During the action inquiry process, participants across all themes expressed a consistent energy for a values-led approach to developing culture. Such an approach would enable leadership to harness Sussex's commitment to social justice and radical criticality, and create meaningful and sustained change. Participants wanted to see Sussex associated with an authentic commitment to values such as care, collaboration, collegiality, congruence, courage, inclusion, integrity, kindness, openness, respect, responsibility, and unity. Following CHUCL input to the process, Sussex's Strategic Framework 2025 has already been based on some of these values, and others that our research participants would probably support. However, it will take work to embed these into the structures and cultures of the institution, and this work cannot and should not be achieved on the goodwill of certain groups of people. In addition, values are not enough: Sussex also needs to build trust and tackle the institutional dynamics we have identified which are restricting its ability to develop, and staff in particular need more resources, time, and space to think and reflect and ultimately to learn and grow.

Leadership is key to a meaningful change process at every level. In all organisations, when staff are overseen by fair-minded, strong and caring leaders, they tend to feel trusted, happy and well supported (Nevis 1998). Given the history of leadership at Sussex, it is especially important that positive values are embodied and consistently applied at senior levels, as well as throughout the community. As Schein's Lily Pond model highlights, it is only when there is a high level of congruence in a system, that trust can be built and authentic and sustainable change becomes possible. In systems where there is incongruence between stated values and practices, organisations can become stuck, with impacts on goodwill, trust and staff morale (Chidiac and Denham-Vaughan, 2009) We have reported hope and positivity around Sussex's new Executive Group, although we would also caution that the impact of the 2018 industrial action urgently needs to be assessed.

Our recommendations are not for particular policies or initiatives: we strongly believe that without the right culture in place, the impact of progressive policy is limited. They are also merely a starting point, since it is important for the university to now take ownership and decide how it wishes to evolve its culture. We suggest a set of broad practices based on the cultural dynamics and processes we have identified: how these should be implemented is for Sussex to decide.

1. Sussex should **make the most of its campus and build on how it already creates a sense of wellbeing amongst students and staff**. Spaces at the heart of campus, such as Library Square or the area outside the Jubilee Building, could become important venues for connection between various members of the university community. Protecting and preserving Sussex's natural environment should also be prioritised.

2. In order to interrupt the on-going effects of Sussex's history, **consideration should be given to how campus spaces and the locations of staff and units create barriers and hierarchies**, especially between the University Executive Group and the rest of the campus community, between academics and professional services staff, and between SEF and the rest of the university. In particular, the impact of the sealed-off area of Sussex House on trust between the Executive Group and the rest of Sussex should be considered.

3. It is difficult, in a large organisation, to ensure everyone feels consulted. However, efforts should be made to **build on existing moves towards greater transparency from the current Executive Group**. Communications from this group (and from other senior leaders such as Heads of School) should also be sensitive to how these may be read through institutional history. This is particularly the case for change proposals but also pertains to other forms of communication such as feedback (which can be experienced as blame in low-trust situations).

4. Given the siloisation we have identified, the institution should **explore ways for Schools and Divisions, including SEF, to have more meaningful relationships**. Cultural change cannot be achieved holistically when parts of an organisation are alienated and unable to communicate with and learn from each other (Schein, 2004). This requires attention to the location of different units and flows of communication, and consideration of ways to reduce anxiety, fear and blame and build trust between people and groups.

5. The promising programme of equality and diversity work which Sussex has already begun should continue, and should be implemented with **particular attention to addressing power relations and privilege**. It should also involve specific efforts to **increase the levels of diversity in the University Executive Group**. It is difficult to develop an inclusive culture in which there is a genuine understanding of power relations, in an organisation which is largely homogenous at the top (Kandola, 2009).

6. **Our project findings should be meaningfully linked with both the Strategic Framework 2025 and the EDI Strategy 2025 processes**. This will help to ensure congruence and consistency, and make it more likely that values and power relations are being addressed throughout. Related to this, action plans associated with our findings and these other processes should be clearly communicated, and their commitments carried out.

7. Cultural change in organisations requires resources. At Sussex, to begin with, we recommend the **appointment of a member of staff with relevant expertise, responsible for organisational development** (this should not be given to an existing employee as an extension of their role). This staff member should be independent, but closely connected to both Human Resources and the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Unit. They should also have a budget and access to administrative support.

8. Cultural change cannot be achieved when members of an organisation are overloaded or hurt and have become disgruntled or alienated as a result. It is also important to break the 'habits' of an institution, which requires reflection and time (Chidiac and Denham-Vaughan 2009). We recommend **the creation of more reflective spaces for staff (including the**

Executive Group) and students. These should be both physical and temporal: the former links to points (1) and (2) in this list, and the latter requires that as part of on-going attention to workload at Sussex, there should be **efforts to create reflective time.** For example, unstructured creative periods, or time to undertake professional or personal development.

9. Sussex should also **make efforts to prioritise staff wellbeing, in line with the excellent support provided for students**. In particular, staff tackling emotional issues and/or difficult workplace situations (including members of the Executive Group) need to be better supported.

10. We propose **three specific further Action Inquiry cycles**. The first should be undertaken by the University Leadership Team, with a specific emphasis on how the new university values will be embodied by leaders and embedded in the university community. The second should be for Heads of Department and School Administrators/Administrative Managers (or equivalent), to identify and explore ways to alleviate gridlock. The third should be for the University Executive Group, and should focus on trust.

11. Cultural change requires an organisational orientation to learning, strong leadership at all levels and a desire to take initiative even from those who are not in formal leadership roles (Torbert, 2004). In order to begin to grow this at Sussex, we recommend that a **leadership programme is commissioned and offered to all staff** in the institution. This should be properly resourced and should carry workload allocation points for academics or release from duties for professional services and SEF staff.

12. Finally, due to the timing of our research we think **a further piece of work should be carried out to understand the impact of the 2018 industrial action** on staff and students' experiences and views of the culture (including the Executive Group's experiences). This can be a small piece of work, as long as it is designed to elicit a range of perspectives. It should be conducted urgently, and its findings incorporated into any action plan resulting from our report.

Through these practices, we hope a number of processes will occur. First and most importantly, trust will begin to be rebuilt in the institution: between different types and levels of staff, between the Executive Group and the rest of the university community, and between staff and students. We also hope to see the development of a genuine learning culture at Sussex, where all staff and students are invested in their own development and where leadership and initiative is nurtured across the institution. We anticipate that implementing these practices will help to ease the gridlocking we have identified, through building trust and facilitating communication, and empowering staff to be creative. Finally, we hope to see a more decentralized institution but one where this is held with collectivity, so a more positive and connected culture can develop. It has been a pleasure to work within our own institution on issues around cultural change: we hope this report is helpful.

Before we go, can we just say we love Sussex?

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