

From FLAME to FAME to... infamy?

A report on the University of Leicester School of Business
University of Leicester UCU
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In May 2015 a ‘Task and Finish’ group presented an ‘interim report’ to the so-called University Leadership Team (ULT) — an elite group comprising Paul Boyle the vice chancellor and his most senior managers. Titled *a new business school*, this report examined the departments of law, management and economics — with a view to creating a Faculty of Law, Management and Economics (FLaME), perhaps in the form of a new merged department — a business school.

When large is not large enough

The report devoted considerable space to denigrating the then School of Management, its activities and its ethos. Although it acknowledges this school’s large financial subsidy to the rest of the university — £4.4m in 2013/14, the largest in the university — it immediately proceeds to ponder ‘whether [this] is as good as it should or could be’.

Reflecting on the cost side, the report’s authors speculate that the School of Management spent too much on bought-in teaching. This they find ‘surprising, particularly given that in 2013/14 [the School] had a [student-staff ratio], excluding distance learning, of 12.5:1.’ But why exclude distance learning? As the report notes just a few paragraphs earlier, ‘ULSM is a major provider of distance learning’.

The report goes on to criticise the amount spent on ‘conference attendance and travel’ and the School’s workload model TAP, which they claim is too generous — particularly with regard to administrative roles.¹

In a nutshell, the report’s authors charge that School of Management academics do (or did) not work hard enough and enjoy(ed) too much travel.²

When distinctive is not distinctive enough

Developing a new business school also takes aim at the School of Management’s philosophy. The report notes the School’s (then) ‘distinctive ethos’, ‘the Leicester model of management studies’. The authors’ disdain — scorn even — for Leicester management scholars’ concern with ‘challenging the status quo rather than perpetuating it’ is palpable. In their worldview there is clearly no reason to explore the ‘profound implication of management and organization’ in ‘various pressing global problems’, including ‘the persistence of war, violence, the degradation of the natural environment, racism, sexism, ageism, homophobia, unhealthy and unsafe work environments, work-life imbalance and the unequal global distribution of wealth, to name but a few.’

¹ The report’s authors imply a shadowy history to TAP by commenting that ‘the origins of this acronym are unknown’: ‘Teaching Allocation Plan’ — why didn’t they ask?

² The report notes that the head of school receives ‘a full 1000 hours for administration and, consequently, carries out no teaching’. Our own observations and experiences give the lie to this claim: the three successive heads of school in the period prior to mid-2015 all continued to deliver several lectures a year and supervise a large number of doctoral students. In contrast, our present Dean does no teaching or PhD supervision — and we understand she has increased her head of department TAP allowance to ensure that this remains the case. We also wonder when any member of this ‘Task and Finish Group’ last saw the inside of a lecture theatre or seminar room.

The ULT's lack of concern for the persistence of sexism, at least, is perhaps surprising given its high-profile endorsement of the UN's HeForShe campaign. But our surprise is tempered when we remember that the University of Leicester has a gender pay gap greater than that of any other comparable university in the UK and that its HR policies are contributing to worsening inequality.³

The report acknowledges that 'ULSM has achieved recognition, certainly within the UK, for its intellectual stance and it may be that it is the leading exponent of this philosophy within this country'. But such distinction is not good enough for the ULT: they suggest — with no evidence to support this case — that ULSM would do better by downplaying this distinctive philosophy — i.e. by becoming less distinctive!

The disparaging of the old School of Management on display in this report is part of a wider and continuing pattern. It is common for the new Dean's new Associates to run down the organisation, systems and procedures of the old School. The intention here seems to be to impose a narrative in which ULSM, as it was until December 2015, was not fit for purpose, was something of a basket case even, a narrative which justifies the new Dean's attempt at wholesale, top-down reorganisation.

'Fatally weakened'

Developing a new business school has little to say about the University's Economics department, except to remark that it 'makes a significant financial contribution to the University', that it recruits well and that economics is an area in which 'it is traditionally difficult to attract high calibre staff'.

The report insists that 'there is scope for greater collaboration [between departments of Law, Economics and Management] than exists at present' – and notes that all departments 'recognise' this). But it also stresses that 'none of them appear to be keen on a formal merger into a multi-disciplinary Business School'. Here the Task and Finish Group is very clear:

A second argument against incorporating the Department of Economics within a newly formed Business School is more fundamental. Currently the philosophies of the two Departments are very different and it is difficult, at present, to see much synergy between them. Moreover, although the outcome of the REF was very disappointing for the Department of Economics, its aspiration is to be, in research terms, a top ten Economics Department. Its ability to achieve this aspiration would, it is felt, be fatally weakened by incorporating it within a Business School; there is a strong feeling that some of the strongest researchers would, should such an amalgamation takes [sic] place, seek to leave to join free-standing, highly ranked, Economics Departments elsewhere. ... To seek to force it, against its will, to join a new Business School would be counter-productive and is not recommended.

Speculative proposals for a new business school appeared to have been laid to rest six months after *Developing a new business school* appeared. A 'FLAME discussion summary' document concluded:

All three departments, in different ways, have an uncomfortable relationship with the vocational/applied end of their subjects, which is what a FLAME-restructuring would be designed to develop. This decision could not, therefore, be a consensual one. An imposed decision could generate problems in supporting the current teaching provision and in developing new offerings, and the benefits of the proposed structural changes are not obvious. We are thus recommending that we do not pursue a FLAME project in any of the forms outlined above and therefore recommend appointing a HoD for Management within the current structure.

According the document, 'ULT approved these recommendations on 05/10/2015'.

³ We also see little evidence that our ULT pays more than scant attention to our 'natural environment' in its physical infrastructure plans and ambitions for global expansion.

From FLAME to FAME

As we know, the University of Leicester Business School was born in August 2016, a result of the forced marriage of the Department of Economics and the School of Management. (For whatever reasons, the Law School has been allowed to remain outside of this new department.)

Professor Boyle clearly set aside concerns regarding incompatible philosophies and a possible exodus of economists. In fact the Task and Finish Group's 'strong feeling that some of the strongest researchers [in Economics] would ... seek to leave' seems to have been well-founded.

Professor Chris Wallace resigned his position as head of Economics because of the strength of his opposition to the merger. Although he remains at the University of Leicester, given his publication record (with papers in many of the world's most prestigious economics journals), one wonders for how much longer. Three economists, including the researcher with the best REF submission record, took advantage of the 'voluntary' redundancy period. One more left in January and another has just given notice to leave in June – these latter two are both headed for Paul Boyle's former employer, St. Andrews, where the School of Economics and Finance is ranked no. 6 in the UK and is independent of that university's School of Management.

Beyond this, the University of Leicester's new School of Business – across all its divisions – is awash with rumours of people applying for new jobs and attending interviews. It doesn't take an economist to understand – though economists confirm that this is indeed the case – that the scholars who will be most successful in finding positions elsewhere will be those with most to contribute towards REF2021.

From 'business-facing' to business-like

A theme that runs through *Developing a new business school* is that 'FLAME' courses and research should be more 'business-facing'. When we understand this motivation on the part of the ULT, we understand why it might consider the philosophical ethos of the School of Management not only as a barrier to any merger with the Department of Economics, but, more importantly, as an affront to its own ambitions for such a 'business-facing' orientation.

Thus the old School of Management's guiding axiom 'management is too important not to debate' has been quietly dropped. Even the old School's commitment to the United Nation's Principles of Responsible Management Education (PRME) seems to have disappeared from any prominent position on the new School's webpages. In their place, the new strapline is the distinctively asinine 'distinctive and relevant'.

It is unclear to us where exactly power lies and who is taking decisions. We do know that managers are seeking to abrogate any forms of democratic decision-making. In the old Department of Economics, for instance, the head of department was elected by faculty; whilst in the old School of Management a monthly 'staff consultative committee' (with a rotating chair) allowed colleagues to question their head of school. These structures have been abolished. But we don't know to what extent power lies with the University's vice-chancellor and his 'university leadership team' and to what extent with the School's Dean and her 'senior management team'. The Dean is keen to claim the proposed move of ULSB to the Brookfield site as part of *her* plan, but we have reason to believe this decision was taken before her appointment.

The relocation of the FLAME departments was considered by the ULT's Task and Finish Group. It reported that the Economics department was ambivalent about moving – as was the Law School. The School of Management was keener, suggesting that 'a building that included social space for staff and students, computer rooms and a reception would help with cohesion and morale, and perhaps with recruitment'. This Task and Finish Group concluded that relocating these departments

would require the construction of a new building. It is envisaged that such a building would have sufficient space to accommodate all three Departments and also allow room for 30% expansion. Assuming that such a building could be constructed on land currently owned by the University the cost would be in the order of £39 million. This cost will increase the longer it takes to arrive at a decision and commit to the project.

The ULT certainly seems to have committed to the new-site project rather quickly – since it hasn’t found time to consult in any meaningful sense with any employee or student who will actually be affected by the move. But it is committing far less than the £39 million estimated to be necessary. In fact it plans to spend just £15 million on the Brookfield site. The inevitable result will be a business school on the cheap. Indeed this is blatantly apparent by our managers’ intention that business-school academics will be required to share offices – certainly an arrangement that would make ULSB distinctive vis-à-vis other business schools. In the damning judgement of one senior colleague:

Shared offices are not compatible with research in higher education, nor indeed with the kinds of teaching arrangements we have a school. That is why they are not used by top 20 Business Schools. ... [T]he proposition of shared offices means that we cannot achieve the goal of becoming such a School.

What’s Next? (Commencing our descent...)

Prominent Brexiteer and Next plc chief executive Simon Wolfson, Baron of Aspley Guise, is no stranger to controversy. In 2010 the company he heads was at the centre of a sweatshop labour scandal. In 2013 Next was accused of hiring Polish workers on lower wages than their British counterparts. In 2015 it stopped paying a premium to staff working on Sundays – and threatened to make redundant staff who did not accept their new conditions. Also in 2015 Lord Wolfson claimed his company’s starting pay rate of £6.70 per hour was ‘enough to live on’. In 2016, his company failed to discover that one of its bed and mattress suppliers, Kozee Sleep, was employing a ‘slave workforce’ – despite carrying out ‘ethical audits’.

Now the University of Leicester’s leadership team is trying to persuade Lord Wolfson to become a sponsor of our School of Business. Will we wake up to an email one morning informing us that we are henceforth the Next School of Business?

In fact, despite several assurances that ULSB would not seek external sponsorship, we understand that the ULT along with the School’s Dean are going to considerable lengths to secure external funding for the School’s activities. For instance, it seems that the raison d’être of the new Dean’s Lecture Series is to attract external funders.⁴

We don’t know what is next for scholarship in economics, business and management at University of Leicester. But we do predict that, unless the current leadership of the School of Business changes its approach, we will see a hemorrhaging of staff, and the loss of reputations built over many years – a descent into infamy. The Dean’s ambition – no doubt influenced by that of the University’s president and vice-chancellor – is to become dean of a ‘top 20 UK business school’. We suspect that if she is to realise that ambition she might have to do it elsewhere – whilst those of us who wish to conduct our teaching, our research, our scholarship in an environment in which we feel valued by our managers for what we do will likewise have to look elsewhere.

⁴ To be clear: we are not necessarily against this. But we are extremely concerned by the discrepancy between what we are told by our managers and their semblance of ‘consultation’, on the one hand, and their actions, on the other. In his end-of-year talk, the vice-chancellor acknowledged that he and his team should be accountable and transparent: has this been forgotten? *Where consultation meets propaganda...?*