

## Briefing on threatened redundancies at University of Leicester

Prepared by Leicester UCU  
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On 18 January – the first day of second semester teaching and also ‘Blue Monday’ – 145 staff at the University of Leicester were informed they were at risk of redundancy. Staff are threatened in five academic departments – English; Business; Informatics; Mathematics & Actuarial Science; and Neuroscience, Psychology & Behaviour – and three professional services units – Education Services; Library User Services (frontline library staff); and Estates & Digital Services.

- *Academic freedom is under threat.*
- *The University’s underlying financial situation is perilous, but executives deny any link between finances and redundancies and refuse to share financial information with unions.*
- *The University executive has taken on long-term debt obligations that put at risk University assets.*
- *Actions detrimental to everyone associated with the institution (staff and students) are being taken before any underpinning strategy has been published.*
- *The executive is failing to observe the University’s own Ordinances.*
- *Some actions by executives are unlawful.*
- *Executives have targeted Union officials and departmental representatives.*

### Unethical

We will not dwell on the ethics of seeking to make redundant 145 people in the middle of a global pandemic and the world’s severest economic crisis in almost a century. The argument makes itself and gives the lie to the University executive’s morally uplifting strapline ‘citizens of change’. It is worth stressing, however, that in an age when institutions flourish or flounder by their reputation, ethics can be a material force. It is also worth pointing out that we are observing many instances of senior managers refusing to take responsibility for the decisions they are implementing. When informed that a particular act is unlawful, for instance, many managers are responding only that they have been ‘assured by the lawyer’ that is not, and that the University has taken out indemnity insurance to offer them personal protection against any subsequent legal challenges.

### Illogical

In terms of the Executive Board’s proposed changes, there is no logical rationale for these. We have studied the eight business cases (one for each of the threatened areas or departments). Taken individually, they lack both financial and pedagogical justification. They are astonishing, in fact. A few points are worth highlighting.

Scholars at risk include those with the strongest track records both in terms of authoring high-impact publications and in winning large grants. In the **Department of Neuroscience, Psychology and Behaviour**, for instance, 17 faculty are to be made redundant and are to be replaced with eight staff on teaching-dominant contracts. Those at risk include Professor Andrew Colman, the University’s longest serving member of academic staff. Also at risk are several ambitious early-career scientists who already

bring into the institution significant grant income. If the University of Leicester seeks excellence as ‘research-intensive university’, then these are exactly the type of scholars the executive should be working to retain. Such acts of academic vandalism risk gravely damaging our University’s reputation, within the academic community and, in particular, within the research councils who fund us.

In **English** (in the School of Arts), the plan to cancel scholarship and teaching in Medieval and Early Modern literature has attracted widespread opprobrium. This ‘case’ has received attention in the national media. Distinguished scholar and Fellow of the British Academy Professor Ad Putter and his colleagues at University of Bristol have decried the plans as ‘[cultural vandalism](#)’. Professor Isobel Armstrong, also a Fellow of the British Academy, has ‘[returned](#)’ to the Vice-Chancellor the honorary degree she was awarded in 2005; several external examiners have resigned in protest. The case also raises troubling questions over academic freedom, our right to which is both written into the University’s own Ordinances and enshrined in UK law.

### **Academic Freedom Threatened**

In the case of the **School of Business**, the attack on academic freedom is even more blatant. According to Education Reform Act 1988, faculty have the legal right ‘to question and test received wisdom and to put forward new ideas and controversial or unpopular opinions without placing themselves in jeopardy of losing their jobs or the privileges they may have’. The University of Leicester has an [ordinance](#) which grants its academic staff ‘freedom from institutional censorship’. But in the School of Business, where the plan is to ‘disinvest from research and scholarship in critical management studies (CMS) and political economy’ colleagues have been selected for redundancy on the grounds of the methods and approach they adopt in their scholarship. We must emphasise this point. There is no argument here about the quality, however defined or measured, of these scholars’ research: they (we) are threatened with redundancy because taking account of political economy in assaying the objects of our research is now verboten; similarly, adopting a critical approach to orthodox understanding of management is forbidden. The action appears to have prompted the British Academy of Management to issue a statement ‘[regarding the value of preserving pluralism within our discipline](#)’ on 29<sup>th</sup> January this year. Beyond this attack on academic freedom, colleagues have been selected for redundancy on a seemingly ad hoc basis: no transparent selection criteria have been used and individuals have been included in the at-risk pool on the basis of research they might conduct in the future. Here, University decision-makers have ignored the University’s own processes and, more importantly, have behaved in a way that we believe is unlawful. Also unlawful (in our opinion) is the discrimination against trade unionists: eight of the 16 staff at risk are either elected union branch officers or departmental representatives.

### **Serious Flaws**

In the **School of Mathematics and Actuarial Science**, the pure mathematics group is at risk. In a strongly worded statement, the London Mathematical Society (the UK’s learned society for maths), explains why the University executive’s plans are ‘[seriously flawed](#)’. Mathematics, the LMS scholars inform us, ‘is a continuum; what used to be called pure mathematics and applied mathematics are these days so closely intertwined as to be inseparable.’ They ‘consider it to be essential that, in research intensive universities [which our University claims to be], teaching in fundamental mathematics should involve mathematicians who do research in that area. ... In most universities it is considered essential, a key part of the STEM ecosystem. It lies at the heart of national strategies in several areas.’

The University’s executive wants to merge what remains of the School of Mathematics and Actuarial Science with a similarly gutted **School of Informatics**. In this latter department, its plans consist of making redundant many staff essential to the past, current and ongoing success of several hugely profitable [programmes in computing](#) – half of the 20 research-active and REF-submitted scholars. Executives want instead to develop a focus on AI, computational modelling, data science and ‘digitalisation’. But its plans for this are vague aspirations, they are not grounded in evidence and,

moreover, the School of Informatics' existing experts in AI are amongst those threatened with redundancy.

The cases for change are similarly flawed where professional services units are at risk. In the David Wilson **Library**, for instance, it is primarily frontline staff who are at risk of redundancy. These are the people who have ensured services continued throughout the pandemic. This service is an essential one – and since 8 January these now-at-risk staff have been issued with 'critical worker' letters. Most of them are employed at grade 2 or 3, they are amongst the University's lowest paid workers. The Executive Board has masked its intention to merge frontline **Library User Services** with the **Student Services Centre** by referring to the two affected teams by their proposed new name: 'Student and Information Services'. But this new grouping is supposedly subject to consultation: despite not yet actually existing. Reducing library staff by the numbers proposed is an attack on the entire institution's ability to provide scholars and students with access to learning, teaching and research materials.

### **Education Experts Redundant**

In a particularly ill-conceived move, the Executive Board is seeking to cut all centrally provided support for academic practice, curriculum design, and learning, teaching and assessment. **Leicester Learning Institute** provides teaching staff with invaluable assistance in developing programmes and new pedagogies, in obtaining teaching qualifications (the PG Certificate of Academic Practice, for instance) and in gaining Fellowship of the Higher Education Academy (accredited by Advance HE); all of these are vital to the institution's standing within the Teaching Excellence Framework. It facilitates the sharing of good and innovative practice through its annual conference, through its support for funded Teaching Enhancement Projects, through developing staff-student partnerships, as well as through other forums. Perhaps most importantly, Leicester Learning Institute translates abstract education strategy and policy (as formulated by government) and uses its extensive pedagogical expertise to help teaching teams implement these policies. The most recent example of this was the blended learning that has been offered to students throughout the 11 months (and counting) of the COVID-19 pandemic – 'Ignite Dual Delivery', as it is called at University of Leicester. In normal times our colleagues at Leicester Learning Institute do extensive work supporting Deans of Education, Directors of Learning and Teaching, module conveners and programme development teams. They also do important work on decolonising the curriculum and reducing the BAME awarding gap through curriculum enhancement. The 'business case' proposes making seven people redundant in Leicester Learning Institute. Instead, it envisages the creation of a new unit called Education Services. This will play a role in compliance with various educational standards and in monitoring quality, but this proposed unit has just two 'developer' posts to cover all the above functions. With the current strategic intention of developing a more flexible and inclusive curriculum and reaching out to new markets, how can these roles be redundant?

We are also aware of other 'cases' that seem to make no sense. The entirety of the **Business Change** team, who currently sit within Student and Academic Services are also at risk of redundancy. Why make redundant all of the business change professionals when embarking upon significant business change?

### **"No Plan, Nishan"**

So much for the eight business cases taken individually. Taken together there is even less coherence. University of Leicester's president and vice-chancellor Nishan Canagarajah wishes to 'shape for excellence'. But there exists no strategic plan underpinning this marketing strapline, certainly not one that has been made public. Staff have been informed the pandemic has delayed the development of the University's strategy. But COVID has not slowed executives' creation of plans – the 'business cases' – designed to make redundant 145 members of staff.

## Financial Fragility

The Vice-Chancellor and other members of his Executive Board have repeatedly denied that their redundancy plans are driven by financial motivations. They have used this purported absence of financial motive as a reason for their refusal to share with campus unions any financial information – thus denying any opportunity for unions to collaborate with senior managers in order to find alternative paths forward.

The University's [financial statements for 2019/20](#) – published on 1 March 2020 (six weeks later than usual and only one week before the Office for Students' extended deadline) – demonstrate that this denial is not plausible. The University made a very small surplus in 2019/20 – £400k – but only by abandoning more than 150 casualised staff in April 2020. We expect making redundant 145 staff by 31 July, as they intend, will save approximately £3m. The financial situation is extremely fragile. In order to be considered a going concern, the University must have cash reserves of £30m, but by the end of the last accounting period (31 July 2020), these had fallen to £32m. The University is taking on short-term debt in order to keep these cash reserves above £30m and, we suspect it has deferred payment on £8m of tax liabilities.

The University has five major creditors. But it has failed to agree amendments to its debt covenants with two of these creditors. It has acknowledged, in these accounts, that there is 'minimum headroom against its most stringent covenant'. It also notes that 'further mitigating actions... further savings and efficiencies' might be required in the event 'the Institution's forecast position deteriorate'. In other words, the present tranche of 145 redundancies might not be the last.

We have conducted our own financial investigations into the University's long-term financial liabilities – see accompanying report. We also have grave concerns about financial decisions taken in 2018/19, specifically around etiolated involvement in the Freemen's Common Village LLP, and about the way in which these decisions were arrived at. These decisions put at risk University assets and, we believe, are materially disadvantageous to staff and students; and the way they were taken raises serious questions about the University's governance.

## Failures of Judgement

It is the view of Leicester UCU, hundreds of members of staff, a substantial fraction of the student body and thousands of alumni and scholars working elsewhere are now convinced that our University's Vice-Chancellor and other members of his Executive Board are guilty of serious failures of judgement and decision-making. A summary of this opposition can be seen [here](#). Besides the issues outlined above, we believe they are deploying 'shock tactics' in order to force through the restructuring they desire: one instance is the way University ordinances that govern redundancy processes have been trampled upon; another is their attempt to intimidate and silence staff who are speaking out against this restricting. (One particular example of this involves a potential breach of GDPR – this would be unlawful and is extremely serious.)

The present Executive Board is damaging both the social fabric and the reputation of the University of Leicester – and in its centenary year! This executive is seeking to manage and restructure our University through fear, ignorance and exclusion. But to manage a university on these foundations can only be to manage its decline.

You can find more information about Leicester UCU's views on present events on its [website](#).