

Competition & Change

31 March 2021

Dear Vice-Chancellor Professor Nishan Canagarajah

As editors of the academic journal *Competition and Change*, we are writing to express our extreme concern and dismay about the employment restructuring measures being undertaken at the University of Leicester. *Competition and Change* is a journal of political economy and critical management studies. We are very concerned that the University of Leicester School of Business aims to dismiss from employment sixteen of its academic staff who research and teach in these very areas.

We have two major points of concern to raise with you.

The first is that the proposed change programme appears to misunderstand the nature of academic knowledge. The University of Leicester wants to reserve for itself the right to 'divest from' teaching and research in Critical Management Studies and Political Economy. CMS and PE are academic approaches or perspectives. Singling out specific academics for potential dismissal based on the approaches or perspectives they take in their research and teaching represents an attempt to delete or delegitimize areas of academic debate. In effect, it is to locally outlaw positions and opinions in clear violation of the principles of academic freedom. This unprecedented action simply has no place in a university worthy of the name.

Our second point is that a redundancy process that roots out perspectives with massive historical and contemporary significance is impractical, naive and self-defeating even if the purpose and scope of a university are narrowed to those of 'employability', 'mainstream perspectives' or 'transferable skills'. The leadership of the School of Business has signalled its aim to move further into what it thinks are 'mainstream' teaching and research areas. These proposals show a failure to appreciate that the 'mainstream' is not static but evolving and changeable. They betray a weak appreciation of the nature of business and management knowledge, assuming that the future lies with what might appear to be currently the most commercially oriented areas. There are 'critical' perspectives and literatures on every area taught and researched in the business school environment, including in such areas the School seems to want to characterize as 'mainstream', such as data analytics, entrepreneurship, innovation and leadership. It is simply wrong to assert that a successful business school needs to 'divest' itself of critical thinking and embrace the 'mainstream'. Rather, business school education (like education and learning in any setting) will always contain areas of concern where debate, controversy, point and counter-point are endless. It is simply impossible to teach or research subjects 'un-critically.' Even if the School succeeds in dismissing the sixteen targeted academics, it will not be successful in delegitimizing or erasing debates and controversies that pertain to the fields of business and management. These will continue to exist in the broader scholarly community, and indeed in other parts of the school and university.

It is not too late to change course. As a senior leader responsible for forming and executing strategy, you have every opportunity to reverse course from these confrontational, damaging and unjust plans. Even in the midst of crisis, there are multiple possible ways forward. We urge you to think creatively, to listen to the barrage of complaints aimed at the University of Leicester from across the international academic community, and to properly engage with your staff and campus trade unions to find ways forward that are progressive and sustainable. Please reconsider this drastic assault on

careers, scholarship, free expression and intellectual endeavour. We urge the University of Leicester to avoid pursuing a course of action that will tarnish not only its own reputation, but also that of Higher Education in this country more broadly.

We are most interested in your response to our letter of concern. We would especially like to know why and how you believe it acceptable to initiate redundancy proceedings against academics based on managerial judgements about their opinions and perspectives.

We respectfully ask that you give due consideration to our concerns and questions, and we look forward to your detailed reply.

Yours sincerely

Professor Leo McCann and Professor Hulya Dagdeviren

Editors-in-Chief, *Competition and Change*