

Public Letter to the University of Leicester Concerning the Proposed Redundancies in the School of Business, January 26, 2021 – signed by 2500+ scholars

Dear Vice Chancellor Professor Nishan Canagarajah,

We are writing as academics who have a strong interest and care for the present and future of the University of Leicester. As alumni, past employees, external examiners, and scholars we all share a profound concern about the recent announcement of the planned redundancies in the School of Business. The loss of so many renowned scholars would be a worrying development in and of itself. Yet this announcement was even more troubling by its stated rationale of moving away from “critical management studies and political economy”. These actions go directly against the University’s proclaimed commitment to “Championing academic freedom and the importance of constructive debate”.

This raises serious questions about the process for selecting those potentially affected by the redundancies. It appears that it is on the basis of the content, not the quality of their academic research and teaching, or anything to do with their performance. Instead it appears to be treating the School as a business opportunity rather than as an academic centre for excellence for wider public impact. The University has insisted that this decision has nothing to do with the negative economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. Rather, that its motivation was in seeking to ‘disinvest’ from critical scholarship in the School.

There seems to have been little to no substantial engagement with academics or the wider intellectual community of scholars in the field (including external examiners) as to what should constitute a “balanced” 21st century business school research agenda and curriculum. If the redundancies happen, then it would throw into doubt the integrity of the School’s programmes and overall quality of its research. If, for instance, the School aims to give students greater exposure to “business analytics” then they should also be exposing them to ethical aspects of predictive governance and strategy in order to ensure its inclusivity and overall effectiveness. If there is a perceived need to focus on themes of “leadership” and “entrepreneurship” then critical perspectives are absolutely essential for ensuring that they are able to fully appreciate the contemporary challenges and opportunities they pose for improving organisation and society.

These concerns are not merely academic. Instead they reflect a profound strategic miscalculation and lack of awareness as to the prospective role of business Schools for addressing urgent “grand challenges” facing the world. In light of the University's announcement of other redundancies - such as those within the Humanities - it is increasingly apparent that these decisions are as incoherent in their rationale as they are ill-considered in their strategy. Indeed, if the University is serious about addressing systemic racism and countering historical legacies of colonialism that continue into the present, then it must be consistent and show its commitment in action to those scholars doing the vital critical work necessary for achieving these laudable and urgent goals.

In the midst of a pandemic, the resurgence of far-right extremism, growing global inequality, and the threat of climate change - no serious business school should be settling for “business as usual”. Rather, they should be leaders in forging new theoretical paradigms and practical frameworks for creating sustainable and empowering value creation. They should be equipping students with the critical perspectives and skills to question traditional business assumptions and replace them with ones that better serve the holistic needs of the economy and environment. Indeed it is precisely these broader insights, encompassing “critical

management studies” and “political economy”, that are being asked for by research councils, governments, and the private sector.

The University of Leicester School of Business has an impressive and important global reputation as a centre for undertaking precisely this type of cutting edge and impactful research and teaching. In 2015 the School was chosen to host the International Critical Management Studies conference that brought together hundreds of world-leading academics in Leicester for this purpose. More broadly, Leicester was a pioneer in bringing a critical perspective into Business Schools, and shining a light on the often hidden, dark-sides of entrepreneurship (exploitation, burn-out and resource depletion) and leadership (eg follower dependency, narcissism, and conformity), if they are only seen through the lens of profit-oriented business, and not also as cultural and political perspectives. It is exactly, for this reason, that throughout the UK and globally, Business Schools increasingly view it as their mission to prioritise the needs of employees and societies rather than singularly focus on financial “wealth creation”.

To conclude, we would strongly request that you reconsider your decision. This strategy puts the University of Leicester in danger of looking backwards exactly at a time when its survival demands that it should be forward looking.