

ULSB Pre-Engagement Questionnaire and Other Feedback

Summary of Responses

November 2020

Introduction

Between 13th October and 6th November 2020 three pre-change engagement sessions, led by the Dean and Deputy Dean for ULSB, were held with MISO, W&E and M&O. The purpose of the sessions was to present insights into the challenges facing the management discipline and to seek feedback on how the school needs to change to meet these challenges. Time was allowed at all sessions for staff to share thoughts and ask questions. In addition to the sessions a confidential questionnaire was shared as a way of collating views on key questions and feedback was also welcomed in other formats if individuals or groups wished to do so.

Below, we provide a precis to the observations provided for each question in the form of reflection of the comments received. Note that a number of answers for each question were almost word-for-word identical, which served to re-enforce the importance of some points, but equally did not help in drawing out subtle differences or nuances in individual opinions. Direct quotes have not been included as all staff were informed that the questionnaire and other feedback were confidential prior to completion and we do not want individuals to be identifiable without their express permission.

Question1: What are the particular strengths of the business and management offer at ULSB (eg. Research, Teaching, Partnerships)?

Firstly, in general terms, many respondents mentioned excellence in research as a particular strength of ULSB. Strong performance in the area of outputs, impact and funding was cited. Some went further to highlight particular areas of strength and research focussed on UN PRME and UN SDGs. Some extrapolated excellence in research to include excellence in teaching, although, in general, there were less comments focussed explicitly on excellence in teaching in and of itself. Good facilities, and committed and hard-working academic and professional services staff were also a key theme.

Not surprisingly, some, although relatively few, respondents alluded to ULSB's heritage as a critical management school when discussing the strengths of the school. However, a continued interest in CMS was by no means universally viewed through a positive lens and it is clear that the degree to which ULSB views its CMS background as a strength is contested.

Many more respondents were keen to emphasise the importance of a diversity of perspectives and how ULSB is perceived to offer strength in this regard. In contrast, there were also allusions to a "common mindset". It is open to debate as to whether the School benefits from a genuine diversity of thought, rather than "diversity" actually being used as a synonym for heterodox perspectives that are comparatively prevalent in the School.

In summary, it is clear that many in ULSB view research excellence, particularly in areas with potential to engender positive social change as a key strength. The value of the School's legacy of CMS research is contested, however, research and scholarship offering diverse perspectives is seen

as a key strength. A strong sense of social purpose and a commitment to the UN PRME are valued assets for the School.

Question 2: What are the particular weaknesses of the business and management offer at ULSB (eg. Research, Teaching, Partnerships)?

Arguably the strongest theme to emerge in response to question two was a plea for less continual change and restructuring. It is clear that a period of stability and consistency of leadership would be most welcome in the School. Hopefully the conditions are in place for this to happen, with a VC, PVC and Dean that are all relatively new in post and settled. That said, the trajectory of the ongoing Covid crisis and its impact on the HE sector are far from certain, so stability cannot be guaranteed.

In relation to some of the themes highlighted in the pre-change engagement presentation, there was an acknowledgement that ULSB does exhibit weakness in certain areas viewed as key to offering students a greater breadth of important subjects along with more practically orientated material. And there was also a recognition that the School has much work to do in terms of delivering an excellent student experience and in showing the students that we truly care.

The challenges associated with achieving meaningful change in teaching programmes at Leicester were highlighted and it is clear that both ULSB and the institution must work on achieving greater agility and appearing to welcome and nurture change initiatives, rather than erecting barriers, whether real or perceived.

Some respondents also felt that high workloads in ULSB are a weakness and one that has been exacerbated by the Covid crisis and one final perceived weakness worthy of note was the relative lack of attention and priority given to flexible learning programmes and how ULSB has lost its leadership in the area of flexible learning, a key strategic priority for the School.

Overall, it is clear that continual change and restructuring is not welcomed, notwithstanding the challenges associated with the current HE context may necessitate further rapid responses to ensure School and Institutional sustainability. A lack of expertise in key areas such as big data analysis, blockchain etc. is acknowledged as a weakness. Also acknowledged are the relatively poor student experience and student care in Business and Management. The difficulties of engendering change are highlighted as well as the challenges associated with a perceived heavy workload, partly associated with dealing with the Covid crisis.

Question 3: What knowledge and competencies are required to ensure the maximum chances of success for our graduates in the world of work now and in the future?

The first main theme to emerge in reflections on question three was the need to ensure that graduates are discerning, reflexive and schooled in the art of good judgment. The ability to think critically and engage in sound reasoning are also seen as key. Respondents were also keen to stress the importance of graduates developing a nuanced understanding of the broader context in which business operates and an appreciation of the impact of business decisions on the wider world.

And such observations were often coupled with the need to encourage students to reflect on some of the main challenges faced, such as those outlined in UN PRME. Along with eighty five other business schools in the UK, and over 800 worldwide, ULSB is a signatory to UN PRME and remains fully committed to the six principles laid down to ensure that *we “provide future leaders with the skills needed to balance economic and sustainability goals”*. In the interests of balance, also of note

were a number of responses highlighting a number of areas which are crucially important to graduates where the School currently lacks the research lead scholarship to provide the requisite knowledge and competencies, such as data analytics, leadership, supply chain management and others.

Finally, the need to balance academic content with more skills and competence based education was noted, along with constructive engagement with business more generally and the importance of equipping graduates for future careers success.

In summary it is considered essential that we continue to produce students capable of deep reflexive thinking who have a sophisticated understanding of the contexts in which business operates, as well as the impact of business decisions on multiple stakeholders. There is a strong appetite for the School to remain committed to UN PRME. Equally, there is a recognition that the School needs to do more to educate students to ensure that they are data and digitally literate, skills seen as essential for ensuring the maximum chances of success for our graduates now and in the future.

Question 4: How can we ensure that our research aligns with and underpins an education offer to students which ensures they are equipped with the requisite knowledge and competencies?

The first theme to emerge from this question was the need to ensure that research achievements in the School are recognised and rewarded in a manner commensurate with market expectations in the area of business and management. Such a development would allow the School to recruit suitable staff and more importantly staff can progress their careers at Leicester rather than being forced to look elsewhere for career advancement. Equally, there were those who questioned the status of teaching within the School and observed that too many of the top researchers within the School have little or no role in teaching.

A general level of frustration at the difficulties associated with effecting meaningful change in the teaching portfolio was also noted by a number of respondents, meaning that aligning research with teaching efforts remains a challenging proposition. The lack of time available to think deeply about curriculum change was also noted.

Once again, the recurring theme of linking business education to UN PRME was mentioned, as well as the importance of academic freedom, along with a recognition that the School is best served when staff with valued and important interests are recruited.

Overall the responses to this question offered confirmatory observations to those made previously, but clearly the importance to the School of being able to recruit, retain, reward and promote research excellent staff is paramount. Also important are efforts to reduce the bureaucratic burden of effecting change in the teaching portfolio.

Question 5: What are the areas of expertise that we need to add to ensure we can meet future challenges?

Responses to this question grouped into two broad themes, both garnering roughly equal commentary. The first group tended to point out that the School already enjoys a range of expertise both broad and diverse, which means that the School is well placed to navigate an uncertain future. However, it is open to debate whether the School does in fact have sufficient scholars and expertise in a number of the areas listed such as strategic management, leadership and entrepreneurship.

The second main theme was an acknowledgement of the gaps or deficiencies in subject expertise in ULSB, focussing in particular on areas highlighted in the pre-engagement presentations, for instance technology, data analytics, managing information systems, fintech, creative entrepreneurship, alternative forms of innovation and the area of operations management more generally.

Finally, there were a number of comments stressing the importance of involving those with current or recent business and industry experience in teaching to ensure that students benefit from sufficient practical insights.

In summary, the responses to this question revealed a dichotomy between those who see no need for the School to invest in resources in new (to the School) areas of research and scholarship and those who perceive the need to ensure that the School engages in research and scholarship that will enable us to meet future challenges.

Question 6: Where are the opportunities through our research and enterprise activity to develop new partnerships and links with Business?

Many were keen to stress that partnerships should extend beyond business to encompass a broader range of stakeholders, such as professional bodies, public sector organisations, local government and third sector groups, including charities and Non-Governmental Organisations. Such points are valid, but the question was focussed on business partnerships in recognition of the fact that ULSB does not have close ties with business to the extent that would be apparent with most Business Schools. Some respondents were clearly of the opinion that this is a good thing and helps set the School apart. Others were less so and were keen to emphasise a number of areas where partnerships with business could be enhanced.

The scope for collaborating more meaningfully with SMEs in particular was noted by a number of respondents and opportunities in the area of Leadership and Entrepreneurship were highlighted, along with the desirability of offering business incubation facilities to local start-ups.

So, overall, partnerships with SMEs in the locality and region are seen as key, as are partnerships with Government, NGOs, third sector entities and other organisations.

Question 7: What should the management and business offer at Leicester be known for in 5 years' time?

Many respondents were keen that the School continues to provide insights from multiple angles and encourages a questioning and challenging approach, albeit combined with greater expertise in areas such as data and technology. Within that, there were a number of comments to the effect that we should continue to value what is distinctive about the School, not least a strong sense of social purpose and a contribution to the University's mission to produce "Citizens of Change".

There were some more goal focussed assessments of what we should aspire to be, for instance that ULSB should be known for with an aspiration to achieve a top 25 place in national league tables mentioned and more generally an aim to achieve "triple crown" accreditation. Ultimately, one particular respondent seemed to sum up the required direction of travel in pithy but insightful fashion: *"A robust mix of analytical skills and underlying theoretical understanding"*.

Clearly, there is a strong appetite in the School to retain the distinctive flavour of business and management education at Leicester and in particular have a strong sense of social purpose running through what we do. Encouraging a questioning and challenging approach is seen as key, as is offering insights from all angles. However, there is acknowledgement that we will need to expand the scope of our scholarship to truly deliver such insights.

Conclusion

We would like to extend our thanks to all colleagues who participated in the pre-change engagement process and for providing your comprehensive responses to the request for individual questionnaire responses and email feedback.

As you will see from this precis a wealth of valuable feedback was received as well as questions posed either through the survey or in the engagement sessions that will need further review, consideration and reflection which the school and college management teams will be doing.

Therefore I can advise you that there will not be any confirmed plans on proposed changes announced before Christmas 2020 however if you have any further feedback or questions please send these to ulsb-feedback@le.ac.uk

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November 30th 2020