

To all ULSB staff

2nd February 2021

Dear colleagues,

We are writing this open email in response to the redundancy plans in the school. We are all directly targeted, and we write to share our perspective. We have received many expressions of sympathy and solidarity from colleagues, and it is good to know how many of you support us. As you can imagine, we are highly distressed, because our jobs and our livelihoods are now at risk. We are worried about whether we will be able to pay our rents and mortgages, whether we can provide for our children, whether we will be allowed to stay in the country, and whether we will find new jobs in the middle of a global pandemic.

We have been targeted, not for poor performance, but for being associated with two research areas, described by the school's leadership as 'Critical Management Studies' and 'Political Economy' (CMS/PE).

This is happening in ULSB, not because of an immediate financial crisis or because we have had a significant fall in student numbers. Instead, the rationale is one based on the future direction of ULSB: the school's leadership argues that to successfully compete with Russell Group institutions ULSB must follow a certain set of research priorities and disavow others, namely CMS/PE.

There are many views about what might constitute future-proof and successful education and research in business and management. However, given that such a drastic step has been proposed, threatening to make 16 people redundant, we would expect a solid case, based on clear and logical arguments and fair process. This is not what we are facing.

1) The case

The business case presented to us contains two (yes, two) references to evidence. Both quote single sentences from lengthy documents. Nowhere do these documents single out Critical Management Studies and Political Economy (CMS/PE) as standing in the way of successful business and management research and education. We could point to any number of lines in the same documents that would support scholarship associated with CMS or PE. Just yesterday, the British Academy of Management explicitly defended the importance of CMS/PE for Business and Management Scholarship (1).

The case presented in an attempt to justify our redundancies is highly questionable. We would love to share this business case with you to demonstrate its limitations but we cannot. We have been told that the business case is confidential. Would you not at least expect plans likely to have such an impact to be openly discussed and debated?

2) The process

If the case looks weak, we are astonished by how flimsy, and potentially unlawful, the process has been.

To date, we have not had a full explanation of how we were selected. As you know, CMS/PE are not formal units within ULSB. We have been told that we were singled out from all ULSB staff within scope (research and teaching staff in MISO, W&E and M&O—about 70 colleagues in total) using ‘prima facie evidence’ from publications, grant applications, self-declared affiliations and content on the university website. This selection was done without any input from ULSB’s Associate Dean for Research or from the Research Cluster Directors.

In fact, the only people involved in choosing the targets for redundancy were the school’s Dean and Deputy Dean. How did they manage to do this in a fair and objective way, as required by law, for all 70 staff members? What methodology was used? How did they avoid potential bias and prejudice? How did they overcome the limits of their expertise in the research areas concerned? We have not been told.

We have been told that selecting us was an ‘initial screening exercise’ and a ‘hypothesis’, and that the individual consultation we now face will provide clarity. In other words, our inclusion in the list may have been a mistake. But, if they admit they may have been wrong about us, how can they be sure that they were right about those left off the list?

Like many of you, we are deeply worried about the negative implications of this affair for the reputation of the school and the University. This is already demonstrated by the international outcry against the redundancy plans, with an open letter signed by over 2,000 academics condemning the plans for ULSB (2).

Like many of you, we are also deeply worried about what this process means for academic freedom. Will similar practices be used in future rounds of redundancies, singling out other research areas, such as behavioral economics, critical marketing or human resource management?

With the announcement of the redundancy plans, school wide staff meets were also cancelled for the whole of the term, and there has been silence on the “all staff” email list. It is time to break that silence. At the very least, the school leadership needs to present and justify their case, to respond to questions about the process, and to respect and defend academic freedom.

We know of the support we have from you, and it gives us hope and strength to make the case against these redundancies.

Yours

Dr Gareth Brown, Professor Gibson Burrell, Dr Joseph Choonara, Dr Sam Dallyn, Dr Valerie Fournier, Dr Fabian Frenzel, Dr Chris Grocott, Dr Oz Gore, Dr Ronald Hartz, Dr David Harvie, Dr George Kokkinidis, Professor Hugo Letiche, Dr Geoff Lightfoot, Professor Simon Lilley, Dr Keir Milburn, Dr Martin Wood

- (1) <https://www.bam.ac.uk/resource/a-statement-from-the-british-academy-of-management-regarding-the-value-of-preserving-pluralism-within-our-discipline.html>
- (2) https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSd6LKASpFkpwidMcqFrNI_dKzI07as4ZbtOQAiuJWpSIWwNIA/viewform