

It's a competitive world: An inquiry into the managerial narrative during the dismantling of critical scholarship at the University of Leicester

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It's a competitive world. Everything counts in large amounts
(Depeche Mode: *Everything Counts*)

[T]he university is a site – possibly a frontline – of value struggles. The site of contestation between competing and antagonistic conceptions of the university, of education, of study. This process, these struggles, and the impacts of human agency, are often clarified during periods of open conflict, such as our redundancy struggle in 2021 and earlier struggles at the University of Leicester
(Burrell *et al.*, 2024, p.6)

Abstract

The essay deals with the purge of Critical Management Studies and Political Economy at the University of Leicester. We highlight the construction of the so-called Case for Change, attempts to downplay and delegitimise critical voices, and, finally, the securing of consent to dismantle critical scholarship. Against this backdrop, we will discuss seven characteristics or significant features of the official narrative.

Keywords

Higher education, managerialization, critical management studies, critical university studies, discourse.

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Introduction

Why write again about the 2021 purge of Critical Management Studies and Political Economy at the University of Leicester? Why not move on to other pressing topics? Why should we write about it at all? David Boje's (1995) study "Stories of the Storytelling Organization: A Postmodern Analysis of Disney as Tamara-Land" offers one answer. Boje aims to reject "the artful and managed happy constructions of the Disney storytelling enterprise to reveal a darker side: a Walt who was a tyrant, the crafting of an official history out of multifaceted reality constructions, the excluded voices of former employees, and exercises in story surveillance" (Boje, 1995, pp. 997–998). Without a doubt, telling "our" story in *Shaping for Mediocrity* (Burrell *et al.*, 2024) was, consciously or subconsciously, motivated by the same spirit (to our shame, we did not refer to Boje in the book). In the aftermath of the struggle at Leicester, we asked ourselves the question: What else can we, as academics or former academics, do? One answer was to write about what happened in Leicester. Boje's TAMARA manifesto states that "[s]ome grand narratives need to fall" and asks: "How do we work outside the boxes of modernist narrative and classification?" In our case, our managers" – our antagonists" – narrative was labelled "Shaping for Excellence." With its emphasis on growth, progress, and excellence, it echoes the modernist narrative: "The University of Leicester will continue to go from strength to strength as a world-leading research-intensive university [...]."⁴ In the business school, this meant a plan "to disinvest from research and scholarship in critical management studies and political economy," to become – or instead to become – a "credible champion of business, economics, finance and management research, teaching, impact and engagement and one that offers a compelling challenge to a proportion of Russell Group business schools."⁵

This equally dull and seductive narrative is alive and kicking within higher education institutions (HEIs) in the UK and elsewhere. It gets promoted by, for example, political parties, ranking providers, and "sector leaders" (such as members of the Russell Group) and is boosted daily in university communications. We see it embodied in universities' day-to-day procedures, metrics, league tables, and KPIs. It plays its role in destroying communities of scholars, collaborative learning, critical scholarship, self-governance, and the autonomy of research and teaching. It fosters precarity, excessive workloads, and student debt. Ultimately, it destroys the livelihoods of scholars, the imagination essential to thinking differently about teaching and education, and, indeed, the very idea of the university. Writing about it is one way to capture and resist the fall of the university.

Our essay deals first and foremost with the "official history" of the events at Leicester as seen through our interpretation of "Shaping for Excellence." We highlight a few aspects of the "dark side" of what was going on in our seventh-month struggle at the University of Leicester (we would even question that there is a "bright side" to this story). In dealing with managerial narratives, we are travelling in the footsteps of scholars who highlight the importance of language and discourse to understand the neoliberal university (e.g., Morrish and Sauntson, 2020;

⁴ If not indicated otherwise, we quote from documents archived and available at <https://ulsb16.com>, a site dedicated to document "Shaping for Excellence" and the purge of Critical Management Studies and Political Economy at the University of Leicester School of Business (ULSB).

⁵ For readers unfamiliar with the terrain of UK higher education, the Russell Group is a self-selected association of 24 "leading" universities, which has – we and other critics would argue – an exaggerated and pernicious impact on the entire sector.

Docherty, 2018; Giroux, 2014; Moran, 2021). For example, Moran (2021) delves into the characteristics of what he calls “managerial blah,” exploring a language full of abstract nouns (often put together as two- or three-noun clusters, e.g., “research-intensive university”), intensifying adjectives (“dynamic,” “strategic”) or weak verbs which downplay agency. Liz Morrish and Helen Sauntson (2020) highlight, among other things, the importance of SDSs (“strategically deployable shifters”), such as “excellence” or “world-leading”, used in quite flexible ways, and the use of evaluative language which echoes corporate values.⁶ In this spirit, Thomas Docherty (2018, p.180) argues that the “boastful bombast in the language of excessive success that shrieks from every institution’s leadership office makes it impossible to hear what is actually going on, often in silence and often involving the silencing of less bombastic voices, the voices of critique that note failures.”

Furthermore, we position our contribution within the field of Critical University Studies, a close companion to Critical Management Studies. Following Morrish (2020, p. 238), we may characterize Critical University Studies by three principles:

- A critique of power, control, and inequality in universities;
- A challenge to management knowledge and its ideological underpinnings;
- An ethos of reflexivity and reflection on epistemological, ontological, and methodological assumptions.

Building on the work of these critical university scholars, our contribution provides fresh evidence of the ways in which university management – both senior managers and the so-called human resources professionals who support them – mobilize managerial discourse to effect organizational change, in this case, mass redundancies. Our approach is novel (though not unique) for its in-depth focus on a single case and also for the way that it identifies the institution – the University of Leicester and its business school – and some of the key actors, at least by job title. This distinguishes our article from Martin Parker’s (2014) exploration of change at “Euro Business School,” for instance.

Our article is structured as follows. In the subsequent section, we provide a chronology of the key events at the University of Leicester in 2021, situating these in the present context in which the jobs of perhaps 20,000 UK university workers are threatened. Next, we highlight the construction of the so-called Case for Change, the attempts to downplay and delegitimize critical voices, and, finally, the securing of consent to dismantle critical scholarship. On this backdrop, we discuss seven characteristics or significant features of the official narrative. In conclusion, we return to the purge of critical scholarship and argue that attempts to exorcise critical traditions signal the weakness of the managerial narrative and its proponents.

“Perfect moments:” Chronology and context

In October 2020, in the midst of a UK-wide lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the University of Leicester’s vice-chancellor made the following declaration: “With our centenary approaching and a new strategic plan underway, this is the perfect moment to secure our second century.”

⁶ On “excellence” see also Readings (1996).

Following a brief “consultation” period, on January 21, 2021, authorities notified 145 employees across five academic departments and three professional services units that they were at risk of redundancy. A bitter, seven-month struggle ensued. Many of those targeted accepted so-called voluntary redundancy, in exchange for a larger-than-statutory redundancy payment (though also the requirement to sign a non-disclosure agreement). On August 11, 26 employees, including the three authors of this article and six further business school academics, were “dismissed by reason of redundancy.” The total exodus from the university was around 200, a mixture of “voluntary” redundancy, compulsory redundancy, and resignation. Many of the dismissed, including the authors, appealed their redundancies to the university’s governing body, Council. All these appeals were rejected. Several, including two of the authors, contested their dismissals at employment tribunals, with some success.

The purported reasons for making redundancies varied across the university. In the School of Business, the “strategy” was, as we have indicated, “to disinvest from research and scholarship in critical management studies and political economy.” In English, the plans involved making redundant scholars of medieval and early modern literature to allow, according to bosses’ messaging, the department to “decolonise” its curriculum. In Maths, authorities targeted the university’s pure mathematicians, with the new focus on the applied end of the discipline.

All of the proposals were, of course, problematic on their own terms, with critics describing them as “seriously flawed,” “extremely confused,” and so on. Moreover, the university executive’s plans amounted to a quite grievous attack on academic freedom: in no case was the *quality* of any scholar’s work questioned (as the executors of our redundancies stressed on several occasions). Rather, it was the areas that scholars directed their attention to or the methodologies they employed that were adjudged to be redundant. Unsurprisingly, managers denied that academic freedom had been undermined, and those scholars (like ourselves) who formally made such an allegation found our cases formally rejected.

We believe there were two further factors at play. First, we were convinced that authorities disproportionately targeted trade union organizers. For instance, in ULSB, of the sixteen initially put at risk, eight were union branch officials, case workers, and/or departmental reps. Second, we were also convinced that the university was in financial difficulties, had possibly breached financial covenants with several of its creditors, and that these creditors were pressuring bosses to drastically cut (wage) costs. As with our contestation that academic freedom had been undermined, the university’s leadership repeatedly denied both of these claims, and we were not able to test them in any forum, such as the courts.⁷

However, to repeat our opening question, why write again about these events? Why not move on to other pressing topics? Unfortunately, these very topics remain pressing, pressing, in fact, on the entire UK higher education sector and those who labor within it. While the present moment is far from perfect, analysis of how scholars at the University of Leicester were separated from their livelihoods in 2021 remains timely. In November 2024, for instance, the Office for Students, the body charged with regulating the sector in England, reported that almost three-quarters of English universities are forecast to be in financial deficit in the 2025/26 academic year (Office for Students, 2024). The University and College Union (UCU), which represents academic and research staff, predicts that the jobs of more than 10,000 staff are currently at

⁷ We explore in detail the questions of trade union victimization, academic freedom, and university finances in *Shaping for Mediocrity* (Burrell *et al.*, 2024).

risk and, according to a live list assembled by the Queen Mary, University of London, branch of the UCU, redundancy and/or restructuring processes are either underway or have recently concluded at 96 institutions across the UK (UCU, 2025; UCU Queen Mary, 2025).

Survey results analyzed by one of the authors of this article present a similar picture of the sector. This survey (with responses from 349 individuals spanning 97 higher education institutions) suggest that, across the UK, 9,000 staff are being or have recently been affected by compulsory redundancies, with a further 12,000 affected by “backdoor redundancies” – hiring freezes, non-renewal of fixed-term contracts, “voluntary” severance and redundancy, so-called protected conversations, and fire and rehire (Harrison & Harvie, 2025).⁸ In their freeform responses, survey respondents instanced many of the themes that we explore below. “There was no real sense of transparency and I did not have confidence that it [the redundancy process] had been handled correctly” and “The tone from some senior management was quite intimidating and threatening” were just two of the comments that castigated the failures of leadership. Another (lengthy) comment charged that the redundancy process had been “abysmally, malevolently mismanaged,” that “numbers were faked and changed, procedures invented and changed,” that “complaints procedures were bent and grievances redefined unilaterally into “complaints,” that other staff “were made accomplices,” and finally, that “it felt as a colleague said, ‘like watching the birth of fascism’ as colleagues singled out for redundancy were isolated deliberately.”

In other words, the events at the University of Leicester, which we explore both exemplify and foreshadow a far broader phenomenon in higher education, a phenomenon that is sweeping the sector right now.

Serendipity: Methods, approach, and perspective

We might, cautiously, describe our methodology as serendipitous ethnography or serendipitous participant observation (see Crowther, 2018). We did not actively choose to put ourselves into an environment in which we were exposed to the discourses that we explore; rather, these discourses and their accompanying behaviors (from managers and colleagues) were thrust upon us when we were informed that we were at risk of redundancy. In the ensuing struggle to defend our jobs and livelihoods, we had little choice but to seek to decode and otherwise analyze what was being written and said, to better understand managers’ motivations, to more effectively counter managerial discourse, and, as important, to make better sense of what was happening to us psychologically and emotionally.⁹ For us, four years on, the struggle to process the events

⁸ A “protected conversation” is a confidential, off-the-record discussion between employer and employee about ending the employment relationship on agreed terms. Thirteen percent of survey respondents reported that their employer (or former employer) had misused protected conversations, bullied the employee into accepting a settlement, for instance.

⁹ Of course, we almost always had choices. Before 2021, we had chosen to be critical of management, including as trade union organizers; after being put at risk of redundancy we chose to resist this rather than accept some settlement agreement as some of our colleagues did; after our dismissals we chose to write about our experiences as a continuation of the struggle against the restructuring of higher education. We have thus (attempted) to make our history, though the circumstances have definitely not been of our own choosing. As Marx (1973, p. 146) famously put it in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: “Men make their own history, but not of their own free will; not under circumstances they themselves have chosen but under the given and inherited circumstances with which they are directly confronted.”

of 2021 continues, just as, for thousands of other university workers, analogous events are only now beginning.

During the roughly ten months of the struggle, from the vice-chancellor's "perfect moment" announcement of October 2020 until our eventual dismissals in August 2021, we were confronted with dozens of documents, emails, and other communications such as managers' pronouncements in (online) Q&A sessions (typically for all university staff), collective and individual redundancy consultations, and meetings for so-called non-affected staff (the content of which we received from allies). We studied all of these communications contemporaneously, in real time, as part of the redundancy struggle proper, usually discussing them collectively in the group of nine ULSB academics who remained at risk of redundancy throughout the period and who were eventually dismissed on August 11.¹⁰ A number of us systematically reviewed our evidential resources in the writing of our 2024 book, *Shaping for Mediocrity*, which attempts to tell the whole tale of the Leicester case and situate it within longer-term changes in the operation and governance of higher education in the UK. The three current authors have returned to them again in the writing of this article. These documents, emails, and other communications formed our "dataset."

As scholars, variously, of organization, business, and management, as well as experienced trade union organizers, we were already skilled in identifying and interpreting managerial discourses, and we deployed those skills in our attempts to counter and resist those discourses, as well as in the writing of this article.

The official narrative

Shape (verb): to decide or influence the form of something, especially a belief or idea, or someone's character
Excellence (noun): the quality of being excellent
(Cambridge Dictionary)

To explore the official narrative, we can refer to several documents and proclamations produced during the "shaping for excellence" initiative. This includes announcements by the vice-chancellor, the "case for change" itself, and further managerial communications throughout the process. In chronological order, we can distinguish between, first, the announcements of "shaping for excellence," and second, communications which deal with critical and deviant voices throughout the process. We looked closer at the construction of the "case for change," the downplaying and delegitimizing of critical voices and, finally, attempts to seek and secure consent from "non-affected" staff and the student community. These three areas or mechanisms of creating the official narrative overlap, and together they aim to secure the purview of management to decide the direction and the future of the university.

¹⁰ The other six are Gareth Brown, Gibson Burrell, Sam Dallyn, Valérie Fournier, George Kokkinidis, and Geoff Lightfoot.

Constructing the “case for change”

We were witnesses to and victims of the operationalization of change and change management in the modern university. Change is, apparently, a good thing; even better, it can and should be managed. As the first paragraph of the University of Leicester's “Leading and Managing Change Principles” informs us:

Change is an ever-present and essential part of life, and the University is a constantly evolving organisation. While this can make it a dynamic and vibrant place to work, change can present challenges for individuals and groups, and needs to be expertly managed if we are to realise the benefits of making changes at any scale.

At the University of Leicester, this uncritical valorization of “change” has been elevated to a key or guiding principle, at least in the university's branding. Students and staff alike are referred to as “Citizens of Change.” The university's centenary celebrations, which coincided with the purge and the wider restructuring processes, were marked with the slogan “Celebrating 100 years of change.” In rewriting the history of the university, even its founders and prominent figures, such as the Attenborough family, are addressed as “true Citizens of Change.” Needless to say, not even the dead are safe from such rebranding. Thus, we are told that “in 1921, the first 11 citizens of change enrolled on our campus.”

Moreover, resistance to change is framed as a state of mind that can and should be overcome with the help of change management tools. Resistance is explained by negative emotions (shock, denial, anger), which, in consequence, question the validity of any critique. As David West (2016) succinctly puts it: “The implicit pathologization of those who complain is never far from the surface. Healthy individuals conform, oppositional individuals are maladjusted.”

The authors of the “Case for Change” – a 59-page document setting out the rationale for disinvesting from research and scholarship in Critical Management Studies and Political Economy, i.e., for making us redundant – declared that “the business school sector in the UK is characterized by increasingly fierce competition.” Multiple invocations of “it is clear...,” “it is not surprising...” and “given the high degree of competition...” lead inevitably to the conclusion that we need change. “Like it or not, this is a competitive environment,” we were repeatedly told. In the future – a word repeated no fewer than 44 times in the 59 pages of the “business case” – the University of Leicester School of Business (ULSB) must be a “sector leader;” it must be a “champion of business research;” its research must be “world class,” must have “excellent potential for impact and relevance,” and must “provide graduates with the skills and competencies required for future success as global leaders.” The case constructs a reality to which there is no alternative. In other words, it is a profoundly unscholarly narration of the world. The invocation of anonymous, fetishized forces (“competitors,” “markets”) along with the inferences of urgency (“the world of work is changing at a rapid pace”) together justify “decisive” managerial action; just as a scammer's text message or email enjoins its recipient to click here now if doom is to be averted.

Moreover, the “case of change” constructs the past as a problem. In his account of a change process at a business school, Martin Parker (2014, p.287) observes that the legitimation of change is connected to the de-legitimation of the past: “[I]t was necessary to ensure that the past was not available as a valid position from which to criticize the present. In other words, the past

needs to be articulated as a problem, as something that needs to be escaped from.” In this regard, the so-called “summary of responses” to a “pre-engagement” questionnaire, which preceded the announcement of the “case for change,” is very telling. Here we learn that, “[n]ot 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.” In case that the reader of this “summary” does not get the message, they are reminded in the next paragraph that the “value of the School’s legacy of CMS research is contested.” Thus, it comes as no surprise that the “case for change” claims that critical management research “is not aligned with the proposed future strategy of the School.”

Downplaying and delegitimizing dissent

We already noted that critique was framed as the result of negative emotions such as fear, anger, or frustration. The managerial mantra was that such emotions are understandable and that managers recognize “that this will be a difficult period for those colleagues involved in any future changes.” One way to undermine dissent is to infantilize it, to transform it into the (understandable) psychological reactions of “whining” or hurt individuals – complainers in the sense discussed by Sara Ahmed (2021): We were always heard as complaining – that is, not heard. Senior managers repeatedly sent condescending messages expressing their appreciation that “feelings were running high” and that these times were “difficult” and “unsettling” for those affected. For example, all individual consultations ended with the managers thanking us for our “professional conduct” in these “difficult,” or “incredibly emotional times.” Every email from the executors of our dismissals concluded with a reminder of the existence of various programs supporting staff well-being.¹¹ This constant messaging, rendered in modified form to “not affected” employees, sought to reshape angry dissent into a set of emotions that could be more easily assuaged and appeased by therapy as a convenient substitute for politics.

In line with the change management principles, the downplaying of critique as emotional reactions helped the senior management to claim that everything was as it had to be, that the amount of critique “is normal,” and that they even “expected this” outcry of protest. Even more, we felt that managers read the growing amount of critique as a sign that they were on the right track. Perhaps, according to their university restructuring playbook, everything was normal. If dissent and critique are normal and expected, there is no real need to listen to them.

However, the discursive downplaying and normalization of dissent was not the only managerial strategy at hand. From time to time, it was necessary to demonstrate who the master in the house was, which meant turning to more oppressive measures. Obviously, the situation was not “normal.” We will illustrate this more robust approach with two examples.

First, such threatening measures became visible in the managerial handling of a successful vote of no-confidence in the vice-chancellor, initiated by the university’s students’ union. The question proposed by the union was: “Do you support a vote of no confidence in the Vice Chancellor and Executive Board of the University of Leicester?” “Yes” received 1,010 votes, “No”

¹¹ The principal support on offer was a staff counselling programme outsourced to a private company then called Validium, and since relaunched as HealthHero.

received 82, and “Abstain” received 25 votes. The quorum of 1000 students was achieved, and the “no confidence” position became part of the union policy.¹² In response, the vice-chancellor sent a letter to the students’ union’s president, expressing his “disappointment” about the range of concerns raised in the campaign material and accusing the union of the publication of defamatory material. Moreover, the vice-chancellor invited the union’s Trustee Board to review the union’s processes “to ensure that defamatory material is not published again in the future.” In addition, he “encourages” the Trustee Board to discuss the appropriateness of the quorum for future referenda. The letter closes with the appeal to work together in a professional manner. It is difficult not to see this letter as an attempt to silence the students’ representative forum and to shut down dissenting voices. Unsurprisingly, this letter was the senior managers’ sole response to the no-confidence vote.

Second, this coercive approach was visible in the managerial handling of dissenting voices on social media channels. In April 2021, Peter Armstrong, at that time an emeritus professor of the university, received a letter from the head of the College of Social Sciences, Arts and Humanities (in which the business school then sat), threatening that the university’s governing body – Council – would remove his title, “if [your] social media activity continues in the same manner as I have outlined.” Armstrong would also lose “the privileges associated with the title, which include access to the library and the provision of an IT account.” Armstrong was accused of breaching the university’s “Dignity and Respect” policy with his critical comments on Twitter. When invited to contribute to a *Guardian* article on the case, Armstrong commented: “I accept that I should not have said that the [University of Leicester] managers who were bullying a clearly distressed young academic ‘should be slapped across the neck with a stocking full of diarrhea [sic].’ I am sure that readers can suggest an appropriate alternative.”¹³ That the university’s managers threatened to strip Armstrong of his title – a threat the University Council made good on in Spring 2022 – for his language choices but ignored the bullying allegation reveals much about asymmetric power relations in an institution such as a twenty-first-century British university.

Another aspect of the downgrading of dissent is the construction of managerial superiority via two other distinct mechanisms. First, we were confronted with the claim that managers have all the information and, even more importantly, that senior managers have the correct information to make appropriate decisions. Authorities formulated such truth claims both in response to internal and external critics. For example, in one Q&A session, the vice-chancellor articulated his concerns about information circulated in the public sphere about the university, saying that they would do everything to correct it and share the correct information if necessary. In another Q&A, he claimed that “we are the only ones with all the information about all our disciplines and what’s going on at this university.” Who needs the voice of experts within their respective fields when you have an omniscient senior management?

An additional mechanism for the manufacture of apparent righteousness in managerial messaging is the construction of managers as dignified actors, sometimes in sharp contrast to critics who were deemed to be acting in an unprofessional way. This became, for example, obvious in a Council meeting in May 2021. Its minutes note: “The Chair again expressed his

¹² <https://www.leicesterunion.com/voice/campaigns/past/referendum/>

¹³ Sally Weale and Rachel Hall, “University of Leicester threatens to strip professor of title over social media barbs,” *The Guardian*, 8 April 2021. In April 2023, Peter Armstrong received the lifetime achievement award of the British Accounting & Finance Association (BAFA). In his acceptance speech, he addressed the events at the University of Leicester.

appreciation to the President and Vice-Chancellor and other members of the Executive Board for the dignified way in which they were responding to the inaccurate, misleading, and defamatory criticism that the Shaping for Excellence program was continuing to generate in some quarters.” Thus, throughout our redundancy process, bosses insisted that they would behave in a “professional manner” and exhorted us – those they were dismissing – to behave likewise. Such “professionalism” was supposed to span our conduct in meetings, communications and social-media utterances. Professionalism was understood to mean behaving calmly and “rationally,” not making “personal” attacks, not – for instance – accusing a manager of lying (especially when they had, in fact, just issued a lie). However, in other contexts of university life, employee professionalism is not invited or welcomed by bosses, such as a scholar’s “professional judgement” vis-à-vis the university’s “values,” research priorities, or curriculum content.

Securing consent

The construction of a “case for change” and the delegitimization or even suppression of critique was accompanied by further discursive mechanisms to secure and manufacture consent. The first mechanism is the creation of two groups of staff, labelled as “affected” and “non-affected” groups. Discursively, it creates the illusion that what happens to those “affected” has no consequences for the second group. In the vice-chancellor’s statement, we are told “that this will be a difficult period for those colleagues involved in any future changes.” Staff who had not been selected for redundancy received the reassurance (from ULSB managers) that they should not worry about their future research and should “carry on freely doing the research they want,” qualified by the sinister threat that “over time it is hoped that all staff will reflect on their personal research agenda and how they might best contribute to the strategic priorities of the School.” In addition, staff who had not been selected for the redundancy pool were told that they would not end up in the pool at a later stage.

The second mechanism, which also followed the playbook of *divide et impera*, was based on the claim that ‘shaping for excellence’ and the “case for change” is a “one-off exercise.” In a document entitled FAQs, staff were informed that: “We have no other plans to make any further redundancies in the School of this nature. We view this as very much a one-off exercise.”

What is more, such a supposedly one-off exercise was communicated as necessary to avoid bigger changes in the future. The vice-chancellor was not shy to turn to an evangelical tone when appealing to the collective responsibilities of his “Citizens of Change:”

Taking action now will protect us from further, larger changes in the future and will enable us to be in control of our own destiny. We owe it to future generations to guarantee the long-term sustainability of this University and it is our collective responsibility to ensure this University continues to be successful for another 100 years.

It is not unlikely that this mixture of existential invocations and grandiosity (“in control of our destiny,” “we owe it to future generations,” “for another 100 years”) and more or less subtle threatening scenarios played their role in securing consent from “non-affected” staff.¹⁴

¹⁴ In early 2023, less than two years after making these remarks, the vice-chancellor closed the university’s on-site nursery, dismissing its staff in the process; in November 2024 the university he heads opened a so-called voluntary severance scheme, which will lead to a permanent reduction in staff numbers. The purported reason is

In reconstructing the “case for change,” we already noted several features of the official narrative. In the next part, we will systematize seven discursive features of the official narrative. In doing so, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of how managerial discourse is processed in a marketized university.

The discursive features of the official narrative

Possessive

The official narrative is first and foremost possessive. That is, it enforces and expresses the institutional capture of the university (e.g., Ginsberg, 2011; Shore & Wright, 2017). As Cris Shore and Susan Wright (2017, pp. 7-8) argue, it is “a short step” from the capture of institutional power “to managers” appropriation of the identity of the university, with managers increasingly claiming not only to speak for the university but to be the university. In our case, a stakeholder approach and the equation of the managerial voice with the voice of the university play an important role in the institutional capture of the university. Thus, we can see the construction of staff, students, and other groups, with the notable exception of senior managers and the vice-chancellor, as “stakeholders.” Whereas senior management speaks for and embodies the university (Shore & Taitz, 2012), every other group is constructed as following its own agenda and individual interests. Furthermore, the stakeholder idea enforces the equation of staff and students with “other stakeholders” or even prioritizing the views of some ominous “key stakeholders.” The construction of stakeholders is, for example, evident in the “Change Management Principles” of the university: “Your aim in this stage is to collaboratively construct a case for change that is understood and accepted by key stakeholders.”

Furthermore, imagined stakeholders played an essential role in the “case for change” and throughout the consultation in, for example, communicating the approach to “feedback” (“we’ve received a wide range of valuable feedback from staff and other stakeholders”) or in rejecting the idea of a distinct heritage of critical scholarship in the school: “[I]t is important to note that distinctiveness is only effective if it is truly valued by key stakeholder groups.” In consequence, the voice of staff, affected or not, is just one (interested) voice among many other interested voices.

The equation of the managerial voice with the voice of the university (“we”) was equally widespread. A few quotes from the announcement of “Shaping for Excellence” are sufficient to underscore this form of possessive discourse:

To compete on a global level, *we need* to focus our efforts and build on our core strengths.

We need to take a strategic view of the size and shape of the University to regain our position as a world-leading research-intensive institution.

the university’s financial problems. (See <https://www.uculeicester.org.uk/lucu-statement-on-voluntary-severance-scheme/>) In June 2025, while finalizing this article, planned staff budget cuts of £11 million, the ending of several degree programmes and the “threat” of the closure of the Schools of Education, Chemistry and Geography, Geology and the Environment were revealed. (See <https://www.leicestermercury.co.uk/news/leicester-news/leicester-university-could-stop-offering-10275042>)

Taking action now *will protect us* from further, larger changes in the future and *will enable us* to be in control of our own destiny.

If necessary, the university is invoked as a collective subject to finalize and camouflage the institutional capture:

The University is aware of posts that have been made on social media by a small number of staff across the University that may be in breach of our Dignity and Respect Policy. In each case, these posts have been reported to the University by concerned colleagues.

Urgency

The official narrative is also characterized by its breathlessness, which restricts the space for reflection or discussion and suppresses the imagination of alternative futures. Generally, a breathless discourse is both mind-numbing and discouraging. In our case, breathlessness is grounded in a world-view which construes that which is outside of the organization as an ineluctable and merciless force. Either you survive through adaptation, or you will perish. There exists no other alternative: We have to make changes now! In a nutshell, it is “create a sense of urgency,” John P. Kotter’s first change management step (Kotter, 1995), on steroids: “Not taking the action we need to now may result in further, larger changes in the future.”

In the document entitled FAQs about “shaping for excellence,” we were told: “Universities have to adapt to succeed. We don’t want the University of Leicester to languish because we are not known for leading research, excellent student experience, and up-to-date and modern service delivery – all key ingredients of a successful university in the 21st century.” In another document outlining the University’s new strategy (entitled Strategy for Change 2021–2031), the Chair of Council declares: “No organisation can survive by standing still and, to advance, it needs to demonstrate adaptability.”

In an interesting plot twist, the necessity to push through the changes is justified by giving “affected” staff certainty about their future:

Colleagues in the affected areas have already taken part in the pre-change engagement programme and delaying the next stage will leave them uncertain about their future – something we wish to avoid.

The whole consultation process, too, and in particular the collective meetings, was characterized by breathlessness. There was never time for further questions. There was never time, nor indeed the need, for an additional meeting. The following excerpt from a collective consultation gives a flavor of the atmosphere in such exchanges:

Participant: 50 minutes is not sufficient. It would be good to have a continuation of the meeting as not all the questions would be appropriate to ask in individual meeting and people should have the opportunity to air their views.

Head of College: The three people who have their hands up have asked questions so I am not worried that they have not had a chance to speak, but we will look at a way of addressing this. Thank you for attending.

Haughty

Despite its supposed seriousness, the official narrative contains a good deal of boastful and grandiose language. We already mentioned expressions such as “in control of our destiny,” “we owe it to future generations,” or “successful for another 100 years.” In addition, playing with numbers was important. We can only speculate that the following statement from a Q&A session was not a spontaneous speech act:

I know it's painful, I know it's hard for everybody affected but we have a job as a leader. I have a job to ensure this university can do the best it can to the 3500 staff we have in this university, to the 21,000 students we have in the university, to the 200,000 alumni we have from this university. I want them all to be proud of this university in the years to come and that means sometimes making decisions that will make me unpopular but that is, I'm afraid, what I'm asked to do.

The message is clear: What is the execution of a few redundancies compared to the pride of 200,000 alumni? Throughout the consultation process, management tried to notoriously play down the impact of changes with the help of quantifications (“a small number of staff changes”) while at the same time boasting about the impact of “shaping for excellence.”

Moreover, what we find interesting is the construction of a heroic leadership whose job is painful from time to time – this is what we are paid for – and who have to deal with the pain of difficult decisions. For those who critically intervene, this results in a vicious circle. Not being popular, which in reality means being confronted with critique, is elevated into a sign of firm and authentic leadership. For such a leader, their lack of popularity, and the outcry and critique their actions provoke, prove that they, as the leader, are on the right track. As the saying goes, you can't make an omelette without breaking eggs. What could be more boastful, pathetic, and teflonic at the same time?

Finally, the boastfulness of the official narrative is articulated in terms like “world-leading,” “world-changing,” “world-class,” “world-class teaching facilities,” “excellence” etc.:

The University of Leicester will continue to *go from strength to strength* as a *world-leading research-intensive* university which conducts *excellent research* and provides an *exceptional educational experience* for our students.

Externalizing responsibility

In line with the construction of urgency and a merciless environment, the official narrative externalizes the responsibility for the so-called necessary and inevitable changes. Thus, it is not the vice-chancellor or the senior management who is to blame for what is happening. On the contrary, they are not doing it lightly! No one is to blame for the changes, or, as ULSB's dean told us: “Like it or not, this is a competitive environment.” Mark Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* comes to mind: “Over the past thirty years, capitalist realism has successfully installed a “business ontology” in which it is *simply obvious* that everything in society, including healthcare and education, should be run as a business.” (Fisher, 2014, p. 17). Moreover, during the consultation

process, responsibility, for example, for the screening exercise, was outsourced either to “human resources business partners” or to some “legal advisor:”

We have had legal advice and I take my guidance from HR as to what can or cannot be done.

We think this is a fair process and our legal advisors have said it is a fair process.

I have acted on advice from our legal advisor and it was confirmed it was a valid approach.

Taking advice from HR or a legal advisor is, for sure, a common practice. The problem is that such advice is used to refuse to engage in meaningful dialogue and neglect responsibility for managerial action. This is finally visible in the Council minutes from May 2024, where the Council “notes” the outcome of employment tribunals, which found that David Harvie, Geoff Lightfoot, and Simon Lilley (of ULSB) and Anne Marie D’Arcy (an associate professor of medieval and renaissance literature) had all been unfairly dismissed:¹⁵

It was noted that the University had now received the outcome of two recent employment tribunal cases arising from the Shaping for Excellence programme in 2021. In both of these cases, the employment tribunal had found against the University on procedural grounds. It was noted that the University had followed professional advice on its processes in relation to both cases.

Moreover, the stakeholder discourse plays a further role in externalizing responsibility during shaping for excellence. For example, during a Q&A session, the vice-chancellor explains that, “when I met with the alumni, when I met with the external partners, nobody said everything is perfect... nobody, everybody said we need to do better.”

Finally, we have the infamous sector-wide issues, which are used to declare that other higher education institutions are in the same situation and have to deal with the same problems:

“If you look on the news everywhere you will see the higher education sector is facing the tough choices. We are not alone.”

Monologic

Izak *et al.* (2022, p. 1507) remark “that recent work in management and organization studies is typically inclined to understand organization and organizing as dialogic in form.” In contrast, they propose to take a closer look at forms of “monologic organizations,” where, for example, communication is strictly controlled or follows formal scripts. Regarding the official narrative, its monologic character becomes obvious. It is a top-down as well as spiritless narrative whose agents show an unhealthy relationship to carefully prepared scripts, to line-by-line repetition of PowerPoint slides, and signposting to circulated documents when confronted with critical questions. At its extreme, the official narrative is a narrative without narrators. Throughout the consultation process, we had more than once the uncanny impression that we were dealing

¹⁵ <https://www.gov.uk/employment-tribunal-decisions/dr-d-harvie-and-others-v-university-of-leicester-2603036-slash-2021>; <https://www.gov.uk/employment-tribunal-decisions/dr-a-m-darcy-v-university-of-leicester-2600044-slash-2022>.

with non-human actors who communicated their dictum monotonously, which looked more than anything as if it were intended to put every critical impulse to sleep. The monologic character prevails despite or was even strengthened through the numerous announcements that narrators were keen to listen to and to take feedback into account. The handling of open letters and further external critique from scholarly associations, journal editors, or scholars is a good example. Whereas the critics were told that their “feedback” would be taken into account, it was, in fact, first devalued as critique from some interested corners (“we expected this”) and, second, it was used as an argument to emphasize that strategic decisions are within the “purview of management”:

It is important to note that the vast majority of communication received asked us to reconsider the decision to disinvest from Critical Management Studies and political economy. Decisions relating to areas for disinvestment are within the purview of the senior leadership team and are taken in the light of strategic priorities for the institution. While we respect the views shared by academic colleagues and welcomed their feedback the decision made has been driven by the needs of the business and the future strategy of ULSB.

Teflonic

Another feature of the official narrative is its teflonic character. By teflonic, we mean a discourse (and its proponents) which immunizes itself (and themselves) against criticism. In their case study of “Civic University,” McCann *et al.* (2020, p. 444) highlight as a feature of the managerial discourse its self-validating claims, which “excludes the possibility of mediation or opposition.” In our case, the Teflon nature is visible in the “case for change” documents and in dealing with critical voices, as already discussed before. Thus, the “case for change” is characterized by statements or truth claims that construct an unambiguous reality that does not tolerate objections:

The business school sector in the UK *is characterised* by increasingly fierce competition. *Given* such elevated and sustained levels of competition, *it is perhaps not surprising*.

It is clear from current discussions concerning the UK Industrial Strategy that big data analytics ... will remain key research priorities.

[I]t is imperative that ULSB pursues world-class research across a broad range of business and management subjects relevant to current challenges.

[I]t is essential that ULSB uses its finite envelope of resources to meet national priorities in skills, research, and impact.

[T]he School must invest in research that engenders a high degree of positive and constructive engagement with the business sector.

Revisionist or rewriting the past

Similar to the case analyzed by Parker (2014), our “case of change” constructed the past as no longer available to us. On the contrary, it articulated the past as a problem:

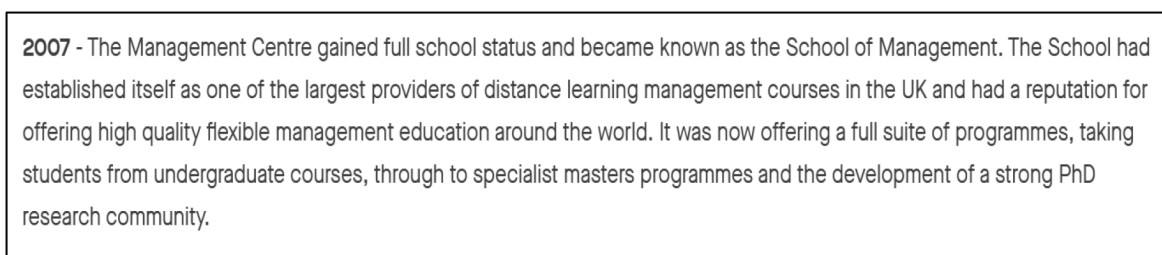
The School's historical focus on critical management research means that other important areas, such as strategy, international business and the business environment, are covered primarily or exclusively from a critical management perspective which does not provide students with the requisite diversity of views, opinions and theoretical orientations in business and management that is key to School strategy and that will meet the needs of industry and future students.

Moreover, the history of Critical Management Studies at Leicester (the "Leicester Model") has been erased from the official history communicated on websites or brochures. Someone unfamiliar with the school's history will not get any information about its critical legacy. Thus, we would argue that this is a deliberate and intended rewriting of the past (cf. Foroughi & Al-Amoudi (2020) for a discussion of the "unintended erosion of collective cultural frameworks"). In this respect, for example, a comparison between the news about the launch of the School of Management from 2007 and the description of this event on the official website of the School of Business in 2024 is quite telling:

Figure 1. Announcement about the creation of the University of Leicester School of Management in 2007



Figure 2. The founding of the School of Management as depicted in the official history of the school in 2025 (<https://le.ac.uk/school-of-business/about/history>)



Discussion

I am supposing that in every society the production of discourse is at once controlled, selected, organised and redistributed according to a certain number of procedures, whose role is to avert its powers and its dangers, to cope with chance events, to evade its ponderous, awesome materiality.
(Michel Foucault (1971): The Orders of Discourse, p.8)

There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.
(Leonard Cohen: Anthem)

In total, the seven features of the official narrative played an essential role in devaluing and discouraging both internal and external critical voices. They also helped manifest the purview of senior management in deciding about the future of the university, the equation of said management with the university, and, finally, the manufacturing of consent to managerial actions. The following table summarizes the official narrative's primary functions.

Table 1. Features and discursive functions of the official narrative

Features of the Official Narrative	Discursive Function
Possessive	Equating university management with the university as a whole
Urgent	Discouraging critique, deterring alternative proposals, inhibiting institutional reflexivity, and manufacturing consent
Haughty	Manufacturing consent
Externalising responsibility	Denying accountability, discouraging critique
Monologic	Discouraging critique
Teflonic	Discouraging critique
Revisionist	Quelling [or suppressing] alternative histories of the university

We believe these features are not unique to the managerial discourse at the University of Leicester. We would rather see them as general discursive features of the managerial language in the corporatized university, which play a particularly central role during restructuring programs. Thus, we believe that an awareness and critical analysis of the discursive mechanisms of the managerial narrative is crucial to problematize and question its dominant character. Besides, it is worthwhile to investigate additional characteristics of the managerial discourse, the changing nature of the discourse over time, as well as differences in the impact and influence of particular discursive functions on the official discourse.

What is unique to our case is the construction of Critical Management Studies and Political Economy as the “Other” of a contemporary business school. We turn to this idiosyncratic feature, which provides insight into the ideologically driven dealings with scientific fields “unloved” by senior managers of the official narrative now. Ironically, we triggered the managerial construction

of Critical Management Studies/Political Economy as the “Other” of the business school during the consultation process. In particular, we asked several times about the difference between conducting critical studies about management, on the one hand, and critical management studies, on the other. Finally, we received the following answer:

It seems like critical scholarship and CMS is being conflated. There is some confusion around those doing that research and not. One can adopt a critical approach but CMS is fundamentally being opposed to management and taking an anti-management position.

This statement by the Head of College, a sociologist by training, who had previously claimed in a co-written published work that “there is perhaps much that youth scholars could learn from critical management studies,” is remarkable. It demonstrates both managers’ unwillingness to seriously engage with a field of study (when current expediencies demand such unwillingness) and the power of management to define what is acceptable and non-acceptable research within a university. In a Foucauldian sense, the Head of the college (now) constructed Critical Management Studies as a dangerous object. What is so dangerous about “being opposed to management and taking an anti-management position”? In our case, one possible answer is that its danger stems from our opposition to THIS kind of management, to THIS way of governing a university. To ban such opposition, it was, in the end, necessary to use the language of exclusion and exorcism:

The opposition to management and the devaluing of mainstream management education and scholarship, whilst central to CMS, is not aligned with the needs of a contemporary Business School.

However, we may read the necessity of performing an exorcism as a sign of weakness, a crack in the managerial discourse and its claim to act professionally. It is the last resort to end all discussions. While the purge was successful in the short term, its long-term detrimental effects on the trustworthiness and integrity of those who claim to be “sector leaders” should not be underestimated. The disbelief of “non-affected” colleagues in what was going on was already visible during the consultation (e.g., “I felt disturbed and there appear to be some similarities to book burning,” “Redundancy is one thing but carelessness and stupidity of this process has inflicted pain and anxiety on people I have known for half my life”) and, in our view, the defensive responses to expressions of disbelief are an expression of the weakness of the managerial position (e.g., “Whether you can trust me is a judgment only you can make and we would never accept the use of the word targeting”).

The necessity of an exorcism was not just related to a supposedly dangerous object of study. It was related to our lack of respect for a management that used the publication in specific journals (e.g., *Organization*, *Critical Perspectives on Accounting*) and the use or dissemination of specific theoretical and philosophical traditions (postmodernism, poststructuralism, critical theory) as indicators to sack us. We assume that our approach to informing the scholarly community and the broader public about such McCarthyism was profoundly frustrating and maybe humiliating for the executors of our redundancies. In more favorable terms, it demonstrates the limits of the official narrative. Whereas it is possible to manufacture consent or discourage critique within the organization, it is much harder to control the public discourse. Whereas the influence of academics and scholarly communities on the direction of universities is shrinking,

they can still raise their voice and spread the word about what is going on in the corridors of power at our universities. In the current climate, these might be messages in a bottle, but at least they are messages at all.

A way forward?

While our case had its unique aspects, we are far from alone in having been harmed by managerial discourse and associated managerial practices in a UK university. We are far from alone in having been “Othered” in a UK university.

As we write, the social fabric of the UK’s university sector is crumbling. According to the Office for Students, the body charged with regulating higher education institutions in England, almost three-quarters of those institutions are forecast to be in deficit in the 2025/26 academic year (Office for Students, 2024). Redundancy and/or restructuring processes are either underway or have recently concluded at more than 100 institutions across the UK’s four nations, according to a list assembled by the Queen Mary branch of the University and College Union (UCU Queen Mary, 2025). National UCU research suggests the jobs of “over 10,000 staff” are at risk (UCU, 2025). Other research indicates that the true figure might be twice as high, once so-called backdoor redundancies are considered – hiring freezes, the non-renewal of fixed-term contracts, voluntary severance and redundancy, protected conversations, and fire and rehire (Harrison & Harvie, 2025).

As the sector crumbles, more cracks in the managerial façade are appearing too – or, rather, more cracks are being forced open – exposing managerial violence to the light. Above, we referred – in the context of our case – to “book burning,” “carelessness and stupidity,” and “inflicted pain and anxiety.” The testimonies collected in *Universities Degraded* (Harrison & Harvie, 2025) make clear that we are not the only university workers to have suffered such experiences; we are not the only university workers who believe we were targeted because we were overly critical; we are not the only university workers who believe our academic freedom has been undermined; we are not the only university workers to have been exorcised by managers.

These many testimonies “from below” make it harder to dismiss our story as an unfortunate aberration. Moreover, they are corroborated “from above.” In an all-too-rare instance of university leaders being held accountable, in 2025, Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs) looked into the ongoing financial crisis at Dundee University, paying particular attention to the actions of the university’s senior managers, several of whom were called to testify before the Scottish Parliament’s education committee. One MSP contended that “[t]he oppressive environment at the top of Dundee University prevented alarm bells from being raised. It shut down any questioning about the performance of the university and the evident financial problems” (Ross & Grant, 2025). MSPs reserved their harshest criticism for the university’s former principal and vice-chancellor, Professor Iain Gillespie. Gillespie was challenged on his character and judgment, his leadership style, which included several allegations of bullying, and his ignorance vis-à-vis financial reporting standards and the financial situation of the institution he led. MSPs also accused him of “financial vandalism” and of being a “good-time Charlie.” Finally, Gillespie was asked whether he was incompetent or corrupt, to which the response was, “I’m certainly not corrupt, so I have to choose incompetent” (see Clarke & Philip, 2025) Iain Gillespie was, before moving to Dundee in 2021, a pro-vice-chancellor at the University of Leicester. Asked by one MSP whether there had been any complaints against him as a boss during his time at

Leicester, Gillespie responded (after a pause), “I don’t remember any such instances” (Clarke & Philip, 2025).

One of the routes forward, then, is to gather, propagate, and amplify these and other testimonies and accounts to crack open the “official” narrative(s) that have acted and are acting to exorcise and exclude countless scholars and other university staff. It seems paramount to create a new common sense, namely that those who, to date, have taken “difficult decisions” have, in fact, been acting with the utmost carelessness (in every sense of the word) and that they should be relieved of their responsibilities.

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