

Collateral Damage: the AMBS alternative staff survey results

Why?

The Senior Leadership Team and its Faculty and School management teams have been in denial about the state of morale and the balance of opinion in the Schools. They present plans for “painful but necessary” redundancies under the M2020 programme on the assumption that academic staff will quickly get over any current upset. However, the everyday experience of academic staff is quite different and so a group of staff at AMBS put together a survey to test opinion and provide a basis of evidence that could feed into the Governors’ decision on 4th October on whether to proceed with compulsory redundancies.

What we did

The short survey of ten questions could be quickly completed with yes/no responses; respondents could also choose not to answer a question. It did not offer “don’t know” options or Likert scale refinements because binary options were adequate for testing the polarised opinions manifest at the last AMBS School Board. On September 15th, the survey was emailed to a list of 290 academic staff obtained by manually trawling the AMBS directory; and excluded only the three academics who are directly implementing the M2020 project in the School. Survey Monkey software ensured replies were anonymised and each recipient could reply once. The final question (Q10) asked respondents whether they were in scope and at risk of redundancy. This, allowed us to separately analyse responses according to whether the respondent was or was not directly affected as a member of one of the “in scope” or “at risk” groups in the School. Within 10 days and with just one reminder we had 182 replies, a response rate of 63%. This compares very favourably with the official University of Manchester staff survey which earlier this year before the M2020 projects were announced secured a 68% response rate in Humanities with the aid of many reminders and incentives.

A vote of no confidence in management and its M2020 strategy

The first four questions (Qs 1-4) were about issues which are a test of academic staff confidence in management and its strategy. And the result is a resounding vote of no confidence because more than 85% of all respondents believe management strategy has not been explained and is not evidence based; the failure to respond adequately to staff concerns encourages 83% of respondents to believe that management will not implement redundancy with clear and consistent criteria.

Q1. <i>Have you been provided with a convincing rationale for reducing staff numbers in AMBS as part of the University’s M2020 strategy?</i>	87% NO
Q2. <i>Has the data been provided to justify the targeting of some groups (and exclusion of other groups) within AMBS for redundancy?</i>	88% NO
Q3. <i>Do you trust management to implement the staff redundancy process by announcing clear criteria and applying them consistently?</i>	83% NO
Q4. <i>Has management adequately responded to the concerns raised through internal governance mechanisms such as the school board?</i>	87% NO

Damage to AMBS reputation, recruitment and retention

The next five questions (Qs 5-9) are about the consequences of the M2020 programme where the replies begin to disclose the collateral damage caused inside and outside the school. The academic staff dispute “pain for gain” because 88% believe the M2020 project is causing reputational damage and will not produce improvements in teaching and learning. Even more alarming is the balance of responses on matters where respondents have direct personal knowledge. 68% of all respondents say that M2020 has made it more difficult to perform their role in the school, 75% are more likely to seek a job elsewhere and 77% are less likely to recommend AMBS as a place to work. The M2020 project has clearly increased staff alienation in ways which will most likely create ongoing problems about job satisfaction, recruitment and retention.

Q.5 <i>Is the staff redundancy programme causing reputational damage to AMBS?</i>	88% YES
Q.6 <i>Will the AMBS M2020 project lead to significant improvements in teaching and learning in AMBS?</i>	88% NO
Q.7 <i>Has the redundancy programme in AMBS made it more difficult for you to perform your role in the School?</i>	68% YES
Q.8 <i>Has the AMBS redundancy programme made you more likely to seek a job elsewhere?</i>	75% YES
Q.9 <i>Are you less likely to recommend AMBS as a place to work since the announcement of the proposed redundancies?</i>	78% YES

The upset of those not in scope or at risk

The key management assumption underpinning the M2020 projects was that staff could be culled within narrowly defined pools without upsetting the rest. Thus, most AMBS staff were not in scope or at risk of redundancy and one division, Accounting and Finance, was not in any way directly affected. The all-respondent views of M2020 and its consequences suggest the upset is not localised and the point can be demonstrated using responses to Q.10, which allows us to compare the answers of the 70 respondents who were in scope or at risk against the 122 who were not.

There are of course significant differences in personal experience and expectation between the two groups. Those in scope and at risk are much more likely to say their role is now more difficult and are more likely to apply for a job elsewhere; 86% of those in targeted groups complain of more difficult roles while a lower (though still significant) 58% of those not affected are of this view. But on the confidence in management questions, the views of those not in scope or at risk are only 1-3% different from those of targeted colleagues. Here below are the responses from those 122 survey respondents who are not in scope and at risk to the first four questions (with the in scope responses included for purposes of comparison). It has clearly not been possible to isolate the upset, so here is broad front collateral damage.

Q1. <i>Have you been provided with a convincing rationale for reducing staff numbers in AMBS as part of the University's M2020 strategy?</i>	Not in scope response: 88% NO (in scope response 87%)
Q2. <i>Has the data been provided to justify the targeting of some groups (and exclusion of other groups) within AMBS for redundancy?</i>	Not in scope response: 87% NO (in scope response 90%)
Q3. <i>Do you trust management to implement the staff redundancy process by announcing clear criteria and applying them consistently?</i>	Not in scope response: 83% NO (in scope response 84%)
Q4. <i>Has management adequately responded to the concerns raised through internal governance mechanisms such as the school board?</i>	Not in scope response: 87% NO (in scope response 86%)

So, what's new?

This alternative survey shows that academic staff right across AMBS now have a negative view of management and the M2020 project. But, what's new? Maybe AMBS academics have long been hostile to management so their negativity is not new but now simply attached to M2020 as the latest management initiative. It is possible to clarify this issue by turning to the most recent official staff survey which was closed in May 2017 just before the M2020 projects were announced. This is a generic workplace survey devised by Capita and responses cover all staff in the Faculty of Humanities not just AMBS academics

The official survey results are confusingly reported year on year as up a little on some indicators and down a little on others with traffic light coding to show where we must do better. But, on a broad view, there is a narrative message in this last survey completed just before the M2020 projects were announced:

- ✓ The job satisfactions of being an autonomous professional were rated very highly. There is 85-89% approval rating for autonomy on "how to go about doing the job on my own", treating the University as "more than just a job", with staff "proud to work at the University" which is "a good place to work" where there is "clear understanding of expected standards of performance.
- ✓ Against this there is long standing dissatisfaction with senior management's capacity to manage change, communicate and listen to staff. With 38-46% approval ratings, only a minority of staff before M2020 believed "change is managed well", "there are effective channels to feed views upwards" or the SLT "listen to and respond to the views of staff".

If the views of AMBS academics were in line with all Humanities staff in spring of this year, what the M2020 project has subsequently done is completely undermine job satisfaction and pride in working for the University while powerfully confirming pre-existing views of senior management.

Breach of implicit social contract

The survey included a final comments box which many respondents filled in. The views are diverse and interested readers can browse them all on the web. The most common views are that the M2020 project has been badly managed and is damaging to AMBS teaching and research. One

important theme is the anguish of staff about the current “mess” and “shambles” which they believe shows that management does not care about staff in a University they were once “proud to work for”. This evidence corroborates our inference from the 2017 Capita staff survey. The collateral damage is grave because, by crudely threatening compulsory redundancies, management has broken an implicit social contract about job security for those who meet the performance standards accepted as part of tenure, appraisal and promotion. Hence, the comments below:

“M2020 has irrevocably damaged both morale within the school and the external reputation. It’s not just the redundancies and rationale for them but the whole cold heartless way in which they have been announced and rolled out. In the staff survey which closed just before this ‘restructuring’ was announced, one of the things that I was most positive about was my job security. I now realise that senior leadership doesn’t care about any of us, we are all seen as dispensable and it is this unnerving arrogance that is going to have a longer term impact. These coming years are going to be extremely tough for anyone who remains given that the same teaching pressures remain (not to mention PGR students without supervisors or expertise within the school). I could go on but sure you will get similar views elsewhere. I used to feel proud that I worked for Manchester University; not any more, this whole thing is a shambles”.

“Despite asking numerous questions, I cannot see how M2020 can in any way improve teaching at AMBS. I have significant concerns that we are not even going to have enough staff to deliver to the students who have already been recruited to our UG programmes, let alone be able to do this well. I have raised concerns, but nobody seems to be listening. It is very clear that those who have made these decisions understand very little about front line teaching, the student experience, staff morale, or running a successful institution. I am devastated that an institution that I was once so proud to work for has behaved in this way towards its own staff. I am not currently at risk, but as soon as I can find a suitable job elsewhere I will leave”.

“I have been at the periphery of this initiative and am not directly affected by it. However, I believe it has soured the working climate within the school and that it has created an atmosphere of uncertainty and distrust in university/school management which is not healthy or conducive to the delivery of high-quality research and teaching. It has created an environment where everyone has a strong incentive to only be “in it for themselves”, to ensure they have a strong enough CV to go elsewhere if things become completely unbearable and other cut-back initiatives are being rolled out. This cannot be good for collegiality and there is a risk that the most employable individuals jump ship (to a degree, I think this is already happening). But I’m afraid this is not the only UK university where we see similar developments due to the pervasive managerialism that is increasingly permeating the higher education sector. Overall, I think the AMBS2020 redundancy programme has been exceedingly badly managed”.

“Although I am not in scope, I am an early career researcher having recently joined AMBS. These redundancies have made me question my decision to join AMBS. I also feel my role is not safe and I am actively looking to move elsewhere.”

Implications: painful and unnecessary

This survey shows that the M2020 project at AMBS done serious damage to a School and University that most were proud to work for. SLT and the Board of Governors should now consider whether they continue in the denial and rebuttal mode that has so far been adopted when dismissing earlier evidence of widespread dissatisfaction like the letter of “no confidence” from 240 professors.

It is not too late. If the accumulating evidence is taken seriously, the question for the Governors should be not whether to sanction compulsory redundancies but how SLT can begin to repair the collateral damage. This is a large task which requires changes in the top down management culture, re-thinking of performance targets and reform of governance systems which do not work for academic and PSS whose knowledge and goodwill this University needs.

We fear that at this late stage, the Governors and SLT will not respond sensibly to the crisis they have created; or, worse still, our Deans and Heads of School will respond, as they know how, with power point presentations on their policies to improve our morale which are not based on dialogue with staff. If management does not respond adequately, the collateral damage in a School like AMBS is such that we can expect a shortfall in capability and performance for which management must take responsibility. That outcome would be painful and is unnecessary.