

Crisis Justice Manchester: Towards a Better Normal

The University of Manchester has been an enthusiastic proponent of the UK model of Higher Education that was in crisis long before the Covid-19 outbreak. The 'market University' model - characterised by low government funding, high student fees and accommodation charges, over-reliance on overseas student income, excessive bureaucracy, and grandiose capital investment projects funded by speculative borrowing - has collapsed. It has left a legacy of increased inequalities within and across institutions. Prior to the outbreak one quarter of British universities were in deficit, while the sector as a whole recorded £44 billion of reserves (>£200m at our university). The human cost of the 'market University' is all too visible: two thirds of universities' staff are on insecure contracts; gender and BAME pay gaps remain significant or have worsened; workloads have risen unsustainably, damaging both the physical and mental health of staff and the quality of our students' education; pension security is being jeopardised; and access by the poorest students to our universities has stagnated. At Manchester these problems are particularly stark, with excessive managerialism and a particularly ambitious building programme which has intensified in spite of the risks of political economic turbulence and Brexit.

While Covid-19 has brought sudden challenges, the new crisis makes clear what the campus trade unions, the Manchester Campaign for Better Governance, and the Students' Union have been saying for many years: namely, that the Senior Leadership Team's (SLT) strategy has made the University of Manchester extremely vulnerable to external shocks. The crisis confirms that the governance of our university must change. However, rather than recognising the urgent need to change its approach, the SLT appears to view the crisis as an opportunity to propose major cuts to staffing, while intensifying an authoritarian governance strategy. It has made only disappointing attempts to consult meaningfully with staff either directly or through the campus trade unions, and has not provided full transparency regarding its evaluation of the University's financial position and the options we have available to us.

This document emerges from the grave concerns of University staff and students about the SLT's current course of action which appears to consist of pursuing a policy of staffing cuts on the basis of largely unverified claims about finances and short time-forecasting, while imposing a 'vision' of a 'post-Covid University' that remains almost entirely uninformed by staff or student input. We do not believe that the managerial culture which has intensified the current crisis is capable of the task of building a 'better normal' in a post-Covid world. *Instead, we suggest that the most effective response will arise through addressing the crisis as a question of how best the University of Manchester community - its staff, students and stakeholders - can continue to deliver its core goals of excellence in teaching, research and social responsibility.* We believe that our response must be guided by the following eight values:

1. **Community responsibility:** The risks for Greater Manchester from Covid-19 in terms of public health, inequality and employment are vast. As a major employer, as a vital contributor to the local economy, and as a research-intensive institution already

contributing to the world's understanding of the crisis, the University of Manchester has both the obligation and the opportunity to truly become a *University Of Manchester*. **To do this, it should set an example by protecting jobs and using the skills and expertise of its employees to find ways of resolving the crisis.** We propose: expanding our contribution to Covid-related research, acting as a community hub by offering fee waivers to people made unemployed by the Covid-19 crisis, and working with community groups and stakeholders to devise new academic or volunteering programmes that respond to specific needs in the Greater Manchester area.

2. **Full transparency:** There is currently a serious lack of transparency with staff and students about the models, assumptions, and data that the SLT is employing in its diagnosis of the current situation. The documents offered to date do not report the projected *net* losses, or mention the size or liquidity of our reserves (last reported at £200m). The projection of £270m in lost fees and student grants quoted by the SLT are [vastly more pessimistic than the surveys and sector-level estimates would suggest](#). Good decision-making requires the scrutiny of the assumptions, models and data underpinning and informing the process and the expected outcomes. Without full transparency and a willingness to use the expertise of colleagues, such scrutiny is impossible. **Accordingly, we need full transparency from our managers on the forecasts and assumptions underpinning decision-making.**
3. **Democratic Governance and a Sustainable Funding Model:** The current crisis has exposed the risks of the SLT's assumptions of indefinitely rising demand from overseas students; its exposure to economic risks around its borrowing and building strategies; and the limitations of a pervasive managerial culture. It is clear that there needs to be fundamental scrutiny of the priorities which underpinned the failed funding model, and the model of decision-making that led to it. The highly centralised, highly paid SLT identifies itself as "the University". But the University belongs to its community of teachers, scholars and students. We ask that our managers appraise their priorities and failed funding model. **We envision a university guided in the interests of knowledge and education by the values of collegial and democratic governance, where the leadership of our university is accountable to its staff and students.**
4. **People first: We do not accept that any projected shortfall of income must mean job losses, non-renewal of our precarious colleagues' temporary contracts, reductions to GTA provision, the cutting or lack of extensions for student bursaries, or other measures which harm our students, colleagues and teachers.** The present crisis will not be resolved by sacrificing the future. Alternatives to job losses include, but are not limited to: the strategic use of the University's reserves (>£200m in the last financial report), suspension of the 'Campus Masterplan', more efficient and community-focused use of its extensive land and under-occupied buildings, a clear policy on furloughing that prioritises our precarious colleagues' livelihoods, the ending of outsourcing, staff agencies and use of expensive external consultants or other third parties, the elimination of expensive senior management and management structures,

the introduction of salary caps, the possibility for borrowing in the short- or medium-term, and the spreading out of any budget cuts over a period of time that reflects the extraordinary nature of the situation.

5. ***Job security and equality: The crisis should not compound insecurities and inequalities in our university; it must be taken as an opportunity to address them.***
To honour its commitment to social responsibility, our institution must reverse the increasingly precarious working arrangements of our colleagues, reverse the gender and BAME pay gaps and reduce the growing inequality between those at the top and bottom of its inequitable pay structure (175 staff members are paid in excess of £100k, practically triple the number than in 2010). During this crisis, the University should do more to address the difficulties faced by staff and students with disabilities and mental health problems and caring responsibilities, while increasing the numbers of disadvantaged students who are able to access our programmes.
6. ***Exceptional circumstances; exceptional measures: We ask that the work we are doing to adapt our work and our education is explicitly recognised by managers as exceptional, dependent on our goodwill and collegiality, and is temporary.*** None of this is 'business as usual': the crisis and our response is taking place in a context of additional stress and anxiety, on top of caring responsibilities held by staff and students which makes our everyday work incredibly demanding. We will resist a 'shock doctrine' approach to permanently undermine our workforce, working and learning conditions in the name of the crisis, whether around online teaching, remuneration or opportunities for students.
7. ***Prioritise our Safety:*** Important future decisions need to be made about moving back to work or to education, around physical distancing, our safety at work, and around the safety of our staff and students and their families and communities. In order to command confidence, the plans for returning to work or study must be developed closely with staff and students, not only government advice. A recent invitation to UCU to nominate a delegate for the back to work planning group is a beginning; **the campus trade unions, the students' union, and other staff groups and fora must be widely and meaningfully consulted.**
8. ***Sustainability:*** The Covid-19 crisis is taking place in a moment where critical change is already required towards green transformation, yet the University of Manchester has had to be persuaded to address its responsibilities. **We demand that our university play a leadership role in the green transition needed:** any shift in priorities must allow our institution to tackle the extraordinary challenges of climate change, biodiversity, etc head-on, for example by investment in relevant research, the use of clean energy suppliers, and adopting other measures long campaigned for by staff and student groups.

We believe that in order to have any chance of succeeding, the University of Manchester's response to the Covid-19 crisis must be based on these eight values. Let us collectively imagine a better way out of the pandemic.