

# The Critical Business School and the University: A Case Study of Resistance and Co-optation

Critical Sociology

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## Abstract

Can a school of ‘critical management studies’ survive in the context of a marketising university which relies heavily on business education for its income? This paper explores the case of a UK management school which attempted to do that and survived for 13 years with a clearly ‘critical’ project. As someone who worked in the school, but left some time ago, I evaluate its successes and failures, concluding that the radicalism of its research and publication strategy was not paralleled by an understanding of the politics of the institution and its environment. This led to a posture of ‘defensive isolation’ which ultimately made the school vulnerable to changes in the strategies of senior university management.

## Keywords

critical management studies, business school, management education, marketisation, engagement

## Introduction

Critical discussions about the marketisation of the university are not new (Aronowitz, 2000; Parker and Jary, 1995; Slaughter and Leslie, 1999). In the UK context, these have been particularly intense over the last two decades, with academics from many different disciplines bemoaning the new subjectivities produced by the measurement of research and teaching, the managerialisation of decision making, the production of the consumer-student, the profits being made by companies selling services into the sector, the subordination of the idea of the university to ideas about employability and national competitiveness and so on. A particularly intense example of these tendencies has been the business school – a part of global higher education that has been growing steadily for a century, but very rapidly in the last 30 years. In 2020, the US Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business, had over 1600 members in 104 countries, and this will only be the global elite.<sup>1</sup> In the UK, the vast majority of business schools are based within universities, so not only have they been subject to the general pressures of marketisation but have been a particularly intense

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exemplar of them. Indeed, without the substantial income provided by the UK's 123 business and management schools, it is difficult to see how state funding to universities could have been progressively cut without catastrophic damage to the sector as a whole. Not only do these schools teach students about finance, consumers and markets, they have also enabled this to become a dominant form of language and strategy within the institutions that they are part of.

This paper is a case study of a business school that attempted, for a decade and a half, to exemplify a different approach to management education and research. From 1998 to 2010, the school positioned itself as the home of 'critical management studies' (CMS), an approach to teaching and research that is sometimes summarised as being 'about' management rather than 'for' management. It's a story of success and failure, of endurance and transience, and of the difficulty of defending 'critical' work in the context of a marketising university. More generally, it is an account of the limited ways in which academic critique might have purchase on its own conditions of possibility, and of the difficulty of thinking outside and beyond the university. The data for the paper come from the authors' central involvement in the story told here, as well as many documents and comments from key informants. All the names and dates have been anonymised, but in some sense this doesn't matter, because the school has now changed personnel quite substantially so this paper is a historical account, rather than a contemporary one.

I begin by providing the setting, explaining something about myself and my position in the narrative, and about the way in which I understand the relationship between institutions and the knowledge that they produce. I then summarise the context, in terms of the very rapid growth of the UK business school over the last 30 years, and move on to the 'case', along the way explaining something about CMS. After two sections on the 'rise' and 'fall' of the school, I move on to discuss the implications of this account, particularly focussing on the ways in which the 'defensive isolation' characteristic of CMS was part of its undoing at this particular institution. I conclude by suggesting that 'critical' versions of academic disciplines risk being no more than academic fashions unless they clearly embed themselves in policy and practice within the university and also make clear links to allies in their institution's environment.

## **Authors, Epistemology and Institutions**

I moved to the Management School at Provincial University in 1998 and was Director of Research (and sometimes Deputy Head) from 1998 to 2010, eventually leaving in 2013. I was heavily involved in the 'project' that the school represented, being associated with the proselytisation of critical approaches to business and management (Parker, 2002). In that sense, this is a partisan account (Brook and Darlington, 2013), one written by someone who has very particular prejudices and is entangled in the story that I will tell. In Howard Becker's sense, I am clear about 'whose side I am on' (1967). So does this mean that I should be dismissed as an unreliable narrator?

Of course, I could respond by rehearsing the argument that, in the social sciences at least, objectivity is a very contested concept, and that all ways of seeing and telling the world reflect the interests of the author. This is a useful blanket defence, but I would rather be more specific here. My intention in this paper is not to present myself – or my academic colleagues – as heroes or victims, but rather to understand the configuration of forces that variously enabled, maintained and opposed the institutionalisation of critical work on business and management in this particular university. I assume that it is a case which has relevance for anyone who is interested in the relationship between thought and institutions, or more specifically, in the prospects for the encouragement of critical thought within neo-liberal universities. Given that the post-1960s university very often distinguishes itself precisely on the basis of the intellectual freedoms it affords and encourages, this example shows how such spaces may open up, and also how they may be closed down.

These are political matters, and that means that they are also epistemological ones. It is important to remember that, as Mary Douglas (1987) puts it, institutions think for us. Indeed, to simplify considerably, the body of thought that is now called institutional theory is an extended mediation on the ways in which organisations provide frames and categories which shape thought and action. The structure of a university is a very apposite example of this, with its faculties, colleges, departments, centres and units providing the compartments within which knowledge is to be produced and understood. The divisions between history and geography, or biology and chemistry, are not objective rifts to be found in the world, but classifications that provide boundaries for particular forms of activity. The production of a discipline requires labour to make a new space for enquiry, as well as all the apparatus – departments, conferences, journals, chairs – that performs this distinctiveness. This is particularly clear in schools of management and business, themselves relatively recent inventions, and in disciplinary terms an amalgam of professional education with economics, psychology and sociology (Khurana, 2007).

Of course, the production of a disciplinary field doesn't in itself determine the political orientation of that field. It is quite possible to have, for example, radical or conservative approaches to sociology, architecture or biology. There are other forces within and without the university which might shape the dominant politics of a field, and these might include the interests of powerful actors within it – whether academics or practitioners, the ideology held by university managers and funders, and wider embedded beliefs within a society. A further factor, which is relatively new in this particular context, is the funding structures of universities themselves. In the UK, schools of business and management have been crucial in providing the income which has compensated for dwindling state support, as well as allowing cross-subsidy within the institution to disciplinary areas that were not as attractive to students and were hence losing money – chemistry, sociology, philosophy and so on. This has meant that, over the last two decades, UK universities have become extraordinarily financially reliant on their schools of management and business, and hence highly motivated to ensure that they maximise their income from this source.

This has been manifested in insistent attempts to claim that the courses offered by such schools are attractive to potential students in the national and international markets, as well as to different career stages and price points. There is rarely actual market research with potential students, but rather a heavy spend on marketing in order to seem 'market facing', 'customer oriented' and so on. Curricula, reading material, course titles and modes of delivery are aimed at imagined customers in order that the products offered are attractive to their putative interests and attitudes. Of course, in a marketised context, all courses become 'products' because jobs are on the line, but the management and business school is probably the most intense example of this activity, performing the knowledge that it also teaches.

As should be clear, this particular form of pressure has a very direct effect on what happens within these schools. It means that there is a tendency to produce and sell knowledge which is supportive of market managerialism, usually by not systematically considering any alternatives. Mainstream business and management teaches techniques (such as accounting, operations and strategy) usually without considering their politics or epistemology, and reproduces particular descriptions of the world (human resource management, international business, marketing) as if this were the only possible world. This is what many commentators have called 'managerialism', the elevation of a particular cadre, practice and subjectivity (Kilkauer, 2015; Shatil, 2020). There is rarely a strident neo-liberalism in this politics, but a 'hidden curriculum' that does not foreground structural problems with global capitalism – such as climate change, social inequality, social inclusion and so on – and tells the story of the rise of management and business as if it were the result of inevitable laws of profit, efficiency, human nature and so on (Parker, 2018).

But these pressures lead to tendencies, not laws. They are not inexorable, and the case I analyse here was an attempt to produce a school which pushed against them, to suggest that business was too important not to debate.

## A Business Utopia

I arrived at Provincial University in 1998 to a small group with 10 staff. Management had been taught there since 1984, initially within the Department of Economics, but it wasn't part of the normal departmental or financial structure of the university. At the time, Provincial was a small university, outside the research elite but with a research led teaching strategy. Whilst most UK universities had been establishing growing schools of business and management, the previous Vice Chancellor (VC) had simply been happy to accept the revenue from this entrepreneurial centre which was heavily reliant on a very profitable distance learning MBA with over 5000 students and a global network of agents. There had been little investment in on-campus teaching and research, and the university watched the money roll in and did little else.

When a new VC arrived in 1994, she appeared to rapidly come to the conclusion that this state of affairs could not continue. Either Provincial invested in Management or it pulled out of it. Given the growing importance of revenues from business and management in other universities, as well as the reputational risk of being over-exposed to a network of agents, investment began to happen. A few appointments were made, partly in order to build for an upcoming research assessment exercise, and an undergraduate degree was launched, requiring an increase in teaching capacity. Interestingly, some of these appointments had sympathies to critical approaches, such as discourse theory and poststructuralism. The new VC was a sociologist and seemed to want to appoint academics who she regarded as having a 'social scientific' understanding of management. The long-standing director, a professor of public policy, was also sympathetic, often articulating the view that all good social science was necessarily critical.

In late 1998, a step change was announced. The VC had been in negotiations with someone she had worked with in a previous university, and who was well known for her early work on critical theories of organisation. The new person was persuaded to come to Provincial as Head of School, promising to build a different way of thinking about management and business education and research, and was given 10 academic posts to appoint, six at professorial level. All the appointees were academics who, in different ways and to different degrees, identified themselves as critical social scientists. They tended to have academic training outside the business school – many in sociology. I was one of the appointments. With some fanfare, the Provincial experiment began, announced in an issue of the UK *Times Higher Education Supplement* as a new 'business utopia' for critical teaching and research about organisations, markets and society. This was to be a place that escaped the dominance of US models of the business school, and that employed novel methods to investigate different sorts of organisations. By the end of the year, the centre had doubled in size, and all the new appointments shared a critical, or at least interdisciplinary, understanding of management.

It is important, at this stage, to note the importance of the context of CMS as a legitimating context. This was a marginal, but noisy, fringe movement of the expansion of business and management education in Northern Europe. Dating from the early 1990s, it brought together academics who were working in business schools but who often had disciplinary training in other social sciences, and shared interests in critical theory and poststructural thought (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992; Hancock, 2012). This was work that developed a sophisticated critique of the language and ideology of managerialism, relying on Habermas, Foucault, Derrida and others in order to do so. As the growing business schools appointed new staff, so did CMS grow rapidly, and by the end of

the decade had its own conference, a section at the American Academy of Management, and various sympathetic journals. CMS was gradually becoming institutionalised, with an increasing number of texts which constructed the canon (Alvesson, 2011; Alvesson et al., 2009; Prasad et al., 2016), and a few schools of management which were known as places which were supportive to these ideas.

Provincial University School of Management (PUSM) was at the forefront of this institutionalisation of CMS. It was now populated by many academics who were clearly 'against' any idea of conventional business education and research, and who were engaged with various forms of Marxist and poststructuralist theory. Under its new head, the centre was rapidly trying to establish a unique position and its CMS 'branding' was the easiest and most comprehensible way to do this. But from its earliest moments, it faced opposition from other members of senior management within the institution, particularly some of the deputy and pro-VCs. The most common account was that the centre wasn't earning as much revenue as it could because of its 'anti-business' orientation, and the university needed that income. This wasn't a complaint that was evidenced by comparative measures of contribution by business schools in other universities, but instead a commonly repeated assumption which led to the need for some re-articulation of the 'critical' orientation for different audiences. Whether the school could have made more income for the university is arguable, but it was almost always believed that it could. However, because its critical orientation was so closely tied to the VC, who seemed to understand it as a 'sociological' school, a certain bargain seemed to be struck. As long as the school made respectable 'contributions' to the centre (just under 50% after salary and costs on average), it was allowed to continue recruiting critical staff. Indeed, the VC took a very hands-on interest in the appointments, and even personally intervened on a few occasions to protect the centre from more explicit criticism from within his own institution.

The politics were complicated, and often exhausting. The university was expecting not only a substantial cash surplus but also a good result in the research assessment exercise which meant that there was pressure to get publications and grants. The academic staff who had been appointed tended not to be compliant or particularly disciplined employees, articulating demands for democratic and transparent management practices and often making noisy complaints about the politics of the university. Other departments within the university saw posts being allocated to management but not to them and were hence often resentful of the support that it seemed to be getting. And all the while, many other members of senior management within the university were either unhelpful, or positively hostile. As a result, in order to provide less ammunition to those who management of the school often saw as enemies, the word 'critical' became less prominent, and was sometimes replaced with euphemisms like 'heterodox', or 'interdisciplinary'. One version of this discursive rebranding was to suggest that the school was a 'social science' department, again trading on the idea that all good social science is critical in some wide and vague sense of criticising established theories and findings, and perhaps addressing social problems. If the word 'critical' was too explosive, then it would be implied rather than asserted.

Despite these problems, the school continued to grow, driven by the university's expectations of increasing income, but consistently appointing academic staff who were capable of demonstrating some sort of research commitment to CMS, or interdisciplinary work more generally. All three Heads of School during this time shared a sense of the importance of cultivating and protecting the school as a site for critical work and were hence heavily engaged in balancing the university's requirements for income through student enrolments and research grants, high scores in teaching and research assessment, and teaching and research that fulfilled the critical mission. These pressures were often contradictory in their implications, and resulted in the head often becoming a lightning conductor for the grievances of staff with high expectations of autonomy and democracy, as well as the relentless demands of senior management within the university for high scores on

every metric. The criticism also continued. The pre-transformation Head of School wrote a report which suggested that the school was being run by a 'clique' which engaged in 'self-serving rhetoric and cynical manipulation of narratives'. Just after that, one of the pro-VCs was involved in producing a report which was extraordinarily critical of the school's ethos and management but was eventually suppressed because its conclusions were so hyperbolic, even libellous in their implications. In 2010, various senior members of the university were involved in writing a paper making the case for producing a merger between the Schools of Management, Economics and Law. It was more measured in its tone, but the implications were clear enough –

Nevertheless, it may also be the case that to pin one's colours so firmly to this particular mast may inhibit the diversity of courses offered and positively discourage some potential students who are not sympathetic to the overt philosophy of the School (. . .) the time has come to see critical management studies as part of the portfolio of the School of Management rather than its guiding star.

A merger was rejected by all the departments concerned, and eventually shelved. Nonetheless, there was a growing sense that the school was surviving in an increasingly inhospitable environment.

Despite the obstacles, the school thrived for a 12-year period. By 2010, PUSM had a clear international reputation as the leading site for critical work, evidenced by references to its strategy within writing on business schools more generally, as well as academic job applications and appointments being clearly driven by the positioning of the school. Though not as strident as some would have liked, the branding claimed that 'management is too important not to debate', and staff at open days informed potential students that they shouldn't apply if they wanted a conventional business education. The school had around 90 academics, the vast majority recruited on the basis of their commitment to critical, heterodox or interdisciplinary work, and was continuing to make a contribution of around 50% of its income. It had done well in research assessment and had research centres and staff publications that clearly underlined its distinctive positioning. It might have seemed that utopia was enduring, but the ground was shifting.

## **Utopia Undone**

The fragility of the bargain was exposed when the VC retired in 2009. Old assumptions evaporated, and the argument that Provincial needed a 'proper' business school gained increasing purchase. A new VC arrived and a narrative rapidly emerged that the university needed to be modernised because it had been held back by the previous incumbent. The entire senior management team was replaced and there was a re-organisation of the academic structure. This meant that the school was now placed in a new college produced by merging the previous Colleges of Social Science and Arts and Humanities, and which was largely managed by people from the latter college. Their understanding of, and sympathy for, business and management, was not obvious, despite the fact that the financial viability of the college was clearly heavily reliant on the income from the school.

There were other factors in play here too. One was the poor performance in a second research assessment exercise. This was largely caused by submitting too many staff – rather than being selective as most institutions were – because the institution's policy was that non-inclusion would lead to performance management and perhaps eventually dismissal for the staff members concerned. The political consequences were that the new VC inherited a school which looked like it was severely underperforming in research terms. To make matters worse, years of friction between successive Heads of School and university management had also led to PUSM having a reputation

for being ‘difficult’, and this was a narrative that was hard to escape. There was no powerful alliance of other actors within the university to support or protect the school. Whether intellectually supportive or not, the heads of other university departments were primarily concerned with their own financial problems. Both at college and university level, they needed PUSM to be making more contribution in order that their own budgetary pressures were eased. Finally, increases in costs and a decline in postgraduate enrolments led to the announcement of a financial crisis for the entire university and planned redundancies from virtually every university department, as well as the closure of several smaller departments.

When the Head of School stepped down, exhausted by the politics, internal candidates to replace him were not favoured. Instead, the university went to an executive search agency in order to find a new Head. There was talk of needing a new pair of eyes, a different approach and so on. External ‘critical’ applicants were not interviewed, and no one from the school was involved in the appointment. The successful candidate was someone from a business school background, with no commitment to interdisciplinary social science, let alone critical work. A background of financial crisis, a new VC, college and Head of School, combined with a persistent account that the relationship between school and university needed to be ‘re-set’ established the conditions for the symbolic end of the critical project, 13 years after it had begun.

In mid-2011, the new Head of the new college sent an email which announced that the Management School was to merge once more with Economics and a new Business School was to be created. This was the complete text:

I am delighted to announce that we are creating a Provincial University School of Business, in which we propose to bring together our School of Management and our Department of Economics. Led by Professor Patrick Morrissey, who joined us recently from Euro University, this venture meets an increasing demand from students and global enterprise for excellent education and strong engagement in the whole range of areas related to business. It will foster innovation in our teaching and research, and increase the breadth and depth of our academic portfolio and external partnerships with business and organisations. Patrick will be outlining over the next few days and weeks further details and information.

The decision was made by senior management within the university, with even the new Head claiming that he didn’t know about the decision when he was appointed. There was no consultation with anyone in the School of Management and the Head of Economics resigned with immediate effect after the email was sent. The Provincial School of Business (PUSB) was launched in late summer 2011. The new school was repeatedly described as being more engaged with business, more relevant and practical with ‘distinctive and relevant’ as the new strapline. Though it was never said explicitly, the critical was sliding from view, or being described as just one element of the school, and not its defining character. Though financial ‘targets’ were not explicitly discussed, an aggressive growth strategy emerged which seemed to be primarily concerned with delivering greater levels of contribution to a university which needed the money.

Its beginnings were not good. The spectre of redundancies was still hanging over the university, and the Economics department was in open revolt. The atmosphere in meetings and corridors was febrile, and almost uniformly hostile to the new Head and the school, as well as deeply disenchanted with the college and university. A curiously schizophrenic situation emerged. There were regular and breathless announcements about the ambition to become a ‘top 20’ business school by a Head of School who was styling himself as ‘Dean’; at the same time, that there was a tangible sense of loss and anger amongst academic staff. In a way that was very similar to other university change processes (see McCann et al., 2020; Parker, 2014), the messaging from the school, college and university had taken on an increasingly bright and corporate tone, with announcements about

various initiatives that seemed largely disconnected from the experience of most employees. A school re-branding exercise was undertaken in 2012 which suggested that the 'sub-brand' image should be based around the four pillars of 'reputation', 'collaborative', 'open' and 'real'. This resulted in the following suggested unique selling proposition.

An inclusive and collaborative environment that promotes curiosity, challenges complacency and builds key skills. We help you to take the initiative and to lead in turbulent times.

This developed into a 'story and values' document in which the 'value proposition', 'brand personality' and 'values and personality' for the new school were described. In none of these documents, even the parts purporting to tell 'the story', was there any mention of the critical project. Then it was announced – again without consultation – that the entire school was to be relocated to a newly refurbished satellite campus, 20 minutes' walk from the main campus, and this would require most staff to share offices.

Despite the architects' futuristic line drawings, the insistence that there would be new flexible learning spaces, open green areas for rest and relaxation and a coffee shop which would be open until late, the new campus became an emblem of betrayal. The new school was to be isolated from the rest of the university and its staff were to have inferior working space. To make matters worse, it began to emerge that the new campus wouldn't even have lecture theatres which were large enough to teach the school's students, and so both staff and students would have to walk back to the main campus to be taught. The university's financial investment in the new campus was, as of 2012, at £16 million, £4 million less than the school's surplus for that year. It seemed that the school was both needed and despised. Its income was required, but not its presence.

Which takes us to 2013, when I left, and the problems that the school then faced. The 'critical' people from Management were bemoaning the more top-down decision making and managerial messaging. Various subversive leaflets had been circulated criticising the new regime and some departing staff had sent angry emails to the staff list, blaming the new Dean and the university for their departure. Even the trade union, which had many members from the school, began to publish reports questioning the merger and organised a petition against the move to the new campus. From 2011 onwards, senior staff were leaving for new jobs elsewhere in a labour market that still provided plenty of opportunities. In the school's 'Strategy Update' of late 2012, the fact that 33 academic staff had left was noted without comment and followed by the 'welcoming' of new staff. The economists continued their dogged resistance against becoming part of a business school. To make matters worse, the growing number of students far exceeded the capacity of the university's infrastructure and it was much too large to cope with the satellite campus it was intended to move to.

Yet at the same time, the surplus that the school delivered was larger in cash terms than it had ever been. Members of the school's advisory board of business people were enthusiastic about the new approach, referring to a welcome change of direction and a breath of fresh air, and there was talk among senior managers at the university about the success of the 'cultural change' which has been engineered. At some point during this period, the website was relaunched, and a new 'Our History' section had been written. There was no mention of CMS, and it was as if it had never happened.

## **Defensive Isolation**

So why did this critical management school fail to become institutionalised? How was it so easily replaced with something that looks now like most of the other business schools across the globe? Given the centrality of CMS to this story and given that CMS has its heartland in

organisation studies, it was in retrospect surprising that there was so little practical reflection by these academics on the wider organisational context and environment. There was a huge amount of heated discussion concerning how the school was led, and about research management and course development, but almost all this debate concerned ‘internal’ matters. It was as if the aim were to produce an island of critical research and teaching, and hence the stance was to defend this territory against the unwanted encroachments of faculty and university. Not only was this always a position of weakness, since it depended on the protection of one powerful sponsor, it also failed to question ‘normal’ social science, it did not build alliances within the university or outside it and it did nothing to question the role of the university as a container for experts to produce knowledge for others who lack it. I will deal with each of these in turn.

Despite its claims to be radical, in most respects CMS is modelled on normal social science. For a start, its content is not that novel. As this journal demonstrates, Marxism, feminism, poststructuralism and cognate ideas have shaped other parts of the English-speaking humanities and social sciences over the past half century without destroying the disciplines of which they have become a part. Neither have the many trenchant critiques of knowledge production and its institutionalisation prevented academics from many disciplines enjoying careers in which they are paid by universities to be experts who are critical of hierarchies, dualisms and the hidden curriculum. CMS academics, like any other academics, teach lecture courses in tiered rooms and mark papers, they desire to publish in highly ranked journals, fly to expensive conferences and complain when the university doesn’t promote them. There was little that was new in any of that. As a well-known CMS academic commented, reflecting on his bruising time as a head of department, ‘it is always easier to *write* something that is different, than it is to *do* something that is different’ (Burrell, 2009: 555).

This lack of any substantial innovation in academic business as usual also meant that when the term ‘critical’ was rolled out to legitimate a particular stance or policy, this was a justification that might have made sense to a school audience but had little traction elsewhere. Other social science or humanities academics were either puzzled or irritated by the implicit self-congratulation in such a term, as if they weren’t critical, and it did little to connect to projects or concerns across the wider university. Of course it was helpful in attracting job applicants who wanted a particular research environment, and it provided a good narrative for the research strategy of the school, but elsewhere it was largely a distraction. Most senior managers, perhaps with the partial exception of the VC, simply wanted the school to earn money and status for the university and had no interest in critical accounts of capitalism. There was little or no evidence that undergraduate or postgraduate students chose Provincial because of CMS, no particular attempt to shape policies on access for underrepresented groups, and – though there was some really innovative module development at undergraduate level – there was little change in the relationship between students and lecturers. Marketing and admissions for the school effectively disguised the distinctiveness of the research mission in favour of generic messages, and course development followed entirely predictable paths of building the taught masters provision and selling it to (mostly) African and Chinese students for high fees. Neither was there any change in the relative pay or status of administrative staff, many of whom were on temporary contracts. To an external observer, and setting research and publications to one side, the school looked pretty much any other mid-ranking UK business school.

This lack of coherence between espoused ambitions and practice did not serve the school well, and neither did the failure to institutionalise its ideas more widely. Whilst there were a handful of joint undergraduate programmes with very small numbers, the school was not financially or strategically connected with other schools within the university. Most of its programmes were separate, which meant that when it came to discussions about cuts, staffing or whatever, there were few other voices speaking in support, either from a position of political sympathy or because of entangled resources and surpluses. Neither did it have particular allies in admissions, careers, the library or

senior management. The school's defensive position translated into isolation from the networks of influence that might have mitigated attempts by senior managers to change its intellectual direction.

The other obvious area from which the school might have sought support could have been its city and region. Given its commitments, it should have been possible to connect to networks of co-operatives, purpose led businesses, social enterprises, perhaps to the city and county councils, the local chamber of commerce, labour party, green party and so on. Alternative organisations could have been the topic and resource for a curriculum that was aimed at making the school useful for allies of its overall political project (Reedy and Learmonth, 2009). It might have systematically developed an access strategy for underrepresented potential students in the city region, working with schools, Further Education colleges to rethink the times and spaces of higher education (Sperlinger et al., 2018). Whilst there were a few links, they were never systematic, or part of a strategy to build a constituency of alternative business practice and education which might have provided a platform to disseminate ideas, to develop research, and to have voices from outside the university celebrating the work of the school. Even the school's 'Advisory Board' of local employers was generally seen to be something which had been imposed as a condition of MBA accreditation. The attitude of most of the academic staff was that their work was to teach and write papers, not to engage in co-producing research that might have had an impact on the sort of businesses and financial ecosystems that took democracy, carbon emissions and diversity seriously.

Finally, and perhaps in a sense summarising all these issues, there was almost no practical attempt to dethrone the idea of the academic as someone possessed of a particular expertise. The CMS project at Provincial was one that implicitly and explicitly reinforced a version of the scholar as the source of inspiration for others. Knowledge, in the form of academic books and articles, was the way in which status was enacted, and the university's claim to be the pre-eminent site of intellectual proficiency was rarely questioned. Though many of the academic staff were citing Bourdieu, Ranciere, Foucault and others, their intellectual practices were largely internal to the institution, assuming the forms of legitimation, hierarchy and expertise which they often questioned in their work. Other academics were usually the intended audience for this labour, with students being exposed to it in classrooms, but there was little attempt to speak with other constituencies, to imagine students as producers of knowledge, or to co-create research with other constituencies (Gaya and Brydon-Miller, 2017; McDermond et al., 2020; Neary, 2020). The idea of dethroning the expert, of radical pedagogy, of the university without walls, were sometimes acknowledged, but very rarely practised.

In summary, the school was never really as 'different' as many wanted to claim. It might sound as if I am simply throwing accusations of personal hypocrisy here, or at least lack of reflexivity (Smith, 2008), but this is not my intention. Quite a few academics were engaged in a variety of radical political projects, but – trade union organising aside – these were rarely integral to their work in the school. The desire to produce a different sort of school was very genuine, and the group of academics gathered was extraordinary in its creativity and political restlessness. However, their activities were effectively contained within the horizon of the university, in which status was gained by engaging in practices that could be recorded on annual review and promotion forms. Business and management problems were articulated as theoretical, methodological or political questions, but bounded in such a way that publication in limited circulation journals behind pay-walls was itself articulated as a certain sort of resolution, and even a form of radicalism. So too was attending and organising conferences on anarchism and Levinas, demanding rotating chairs at school meetings, and teaching students about Derrida and Marx. These, to my mind, were all laudable in themselves, but they were rarely connected to the faculty, university or city in any meaningful and long-term ways.

The metaphor of utopia is an interesting one, because it implies a specific time and space within which a new form of social order might be generated. What emerged in 1998 was certainly utopian, and it did produce some remarkable results, but it was largely limited in its ambition to the transformation of management education and research at one university. Utopias can be isolated places that need defending, and that may not endure, and this one was no different.

## Conclusions

Our brand platform has been impacted by changes in the business environment and changes to the University's strategic direction. Because of this we are refreshing and evolving our brand Provincial to enable us to reposition our offer and build more distinctive and memorable brand.

The university brand and reputation drive international rankings and our objectives with this refresh are to attain a strong and more clearly differentiated position for Provincial. To increase staff engagement with Provincial values and brand buy in.

(A message from the Chief Marketing Officer, 2012)

Time has moved on, and the school is now on its second new Dean. The one that arrived in 2011 left for a management position at a different university in the middle of 2013, declaring in his resignation email to all staff that he was 'proud of the work we have done, the identity and vision we have created together, and I very much hope you are too'. He was followed by an interim appointment who was not given the job on a permanent basis because she refused to sign up to the income generation targets demanded by the university.<sup>2</sup> At the time of writing, a new Dean is in place, someone who does not have any particular sympathy for the critical traditions that shaped the school for a decade and a half, and another new VC has also been appointed.

It might seem that the new Business School has erased the previous iterations, and that a particular sort of market managerial language and logic has now come to dominate the university. The simplest conclusion would be that the CMS moment at Provincial is now over. Yet despite the passage of time and the deliberate attempt to erase this period from the school's history, there are still many members of staff at PUSB who are publishing work, organising events and encouraging job applicants who wish to keep a heterodox tradition alive. The attempt at 'cultural change' did result in many senior staff leaving, as well as recruitment being tilted towards more orthodox appointments, but existing political and theoretical commitments could not simply be erased. Neither could a large body of academic publications, some of which now provide the legitimation for many across the globe who wish to explore the problems with management theory and practice.

In addition, an account which describes the project as a failure does neglect the sense in which the school was an incubator for many PhD students and staff who have now taken their critical commitments to other institutions and other countries. The school had a large and lively PhD student body, and many of them now occupy positions at various schools of business and management in north western Europe and elsewhere. In addition, staff have passed through or left the school are likely to have been shaped by it in some way, and it is still often referred to as an example of what the institutionalisation of the critical might look like, whether as a failure or a success. As Stanley Fish commented on the extraordinary English Department at Duke University in the 1990s before he and others left, the fact that there were 13 years of excitement 'can hardly count as either a surprise or evidence of failure' (2005: 283). People, institutions and intellectual fashions change, and 13 years was the same period that CMS was dominant at Provincial.

Nonetheless, in retrospect, it was curious that some of the lessons of, for example, business strategy and marketing were not pursued more vigorously. It is common enough to refer to 'unique

selling propositions', 'first mover advantage' or creating a niche which other providers do not service. Indeed, the branding of business schools is very often predicated on the discursive construction of uniqueness: the idea that a particular school does things that other schools do not. In practice, however, most institutions adopt the opposite strategy, which is to mimic what the dominant providers do. This can clearly be seen in the importance given to school and journal rankings, and the dominance of external accreditation bodies as measures of status. Pushing back against these measures is clearly important, but the idea of pursuing a strategy which would create a really different school should not then be restricted to appointments, PhDs and research – as it was at Provincial. It would instead have to shape all aspects of what was being taught and how, including engaging with schools and colleges, social movements and alternative businesses in the city region; developing radical pedagogy which could be delivered in different times and spaces to attract a diverse student body; a funded research and impact strategy that helped to deliver; and building political and resource coalitions within the institution to ensure support for the project.

The most troubling question that this experience provokes for me is just how a group of academics with expertise in critical versions of accounting, strategy, marketing, organisation theory, industrial relations, finance, leadership and so on were unable to apply this knowledge to their own situation. It would seem that, out of any of the social science disciplines, those engaged with critical management should have some insight concerning the ways in which market managerial techniques were being applied to their own work in order to be better able to resist them. Indeed, some CMS authors have written persuasively about the importance of 'engaged scholarship', in which academics try to apply their ideas to their practice within universities and outside them (King and Learmonth, 2015). Despite the growing importance of ideas about 'engagement' and 'impact' within UK higher education during this period, there was little evidence of it at PUSM. Tactics were largely understood as resisting the institution, and there was no sense of collective strategy with other parts of the institution, or other organisations in the city region. This suggests that CMS might have been effective at institutionalising itself within this particular part of the academy for a while, but it did so by largely engaging in standard scholastic practices within one disciplinary area. Its radicalism was almost entirely academic, in both senses of that term, and it lacked an understanding of organisational strategy or the wider political economy of the university. As Smith commented in this journal, this might be unsurprising to many 'who see privilege when they hear radicalism' (2008: 26).

However, to be fair to those concerned, such a strategy could only be articulated if the school actually had some control of its own destiny, and in practice it did not. Like any large organisation, departments have autonomy only within corporate and market constraints. UK higher education from the 1990s onwards was almost entirely shaped by the need for certain parts of universities to earn a substantial surplus in order to replace the dwindling central grant. Subjects that could be sold, particularly at postgraduate level, and had resource requirements that were relatively modest in the sense of not needing expensive laboratories or equipment, hence had huge pressure placed on them to grow. The expectations of high contribution to the centre shaped the context in which all and any decisions were being made. This effectively meant trying to sound the same as every other business school, particularly in the context of the highly lucrative Chinese market which was generally perceived to be conservative and status conscious in its expectations. Given this context, meeting the revenue expectations was the most obvious way in which a degree of freedom concerning appointments and research strategy could be gained. Yet at the same time, growing teaching requirements for large classes of non-EU students who expected an orthodox business education meant that the gap between the research strategy and the teaching experience produced a sense of cynicism for many staff, a matter often commented on in corridor conversation. The tensions between political aspirations and classroom experience were manifest in that moment.

What was remarkable, in retrospect, was that the project survived for as long as it did, given the fundamental contradictions it operated within. The support of the VC was central to this, and so was the income which was coming in from the Chinese students on taught masters programmes. This cash surplus bought a certain amount of freedom, but the arrival of a new VC who assumed that the school could be earning more surplus if it were less critical led to the end of the settlement. Change was inevitable, and not politically that difficult since the school did not have many allies that mattered. It was a noisy and uncomfortable process within, but ruffled few feathers outside.

Leaving aside the details of the Provincial example, the bigger issue that remains here is the future of ‘critical’ teaching and research in business and management in times when UK higher education appears to have become a marketised private good. Perhaps it is now the case that the financial pressures on UK universities are such that they push appointments, teaching, and marketing to the safe and profitable mainstream. Business schools end up teaching business as usual, and largely ignore the challenges of sustainability, social justice and global inequality. Despite their protestations to the contrary, the 123 business schools in the UK all look and sound pretty much the same, and are doing very little to address the political, economic and environmental problems of the societies that they are part of (Parker, 2018).

And history continues to move on. The COVID and climate crises have brought to vivid attention the business models of global higher education. In many ways, the expansion of the business school has been the exemplification of an imperial epistemological project, one in which a largely US-flavoured neo-liberal curriculum has been sold to students across the globe. In a world when carbon emissions from flying are an increasing problem, and when the connections between capitalism and climate crisis are becoming clear to many, this particular element of the university may have had its day. The business models of the future must be low carbon – there is no choice about that – and they should also be inclusive and democratic. The space for some part of the university to help co-produce this economy is clear enough, but the financial rewards for marketised universities are less clear. Provincial’s School of Management was paid for by the Chinese one child policy, and the fact that British universities happen to speak the same language as the USA. It is as yet unclear what will finance the forms of business education that must underpin the next economy.

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## Notes

1. Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (2020), <https://www.aacsb.edu/-/media/aacsb/publications/data-trendsbooklet/2020.ashx?la=en&hash=DD37BBF79457F638BBB43C19A72F1840121796D6>, accessed July 2020.
2. Personal communication.

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