

Professor David Latchman
Vice-Chancellor
Birkbeck, University of London
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By email: d.latchman@bbk.ac.uk

26 January 2023

Dear Professor Latchman,

Mathematics and Statistics at Birkbeck

We are seriously concerned about the future of the Mathematics and Statistics at Birkbeck, considering reports of significant cuts to teaching staff across the university. To date, the proposed major changes in the academic and administrative staff have been portrayed in the media as a humanities issue, but our concern is that they may render the Birkbeck degree courses in mathematics and statistics untenable.

Mathematics and statistics at Birkbeck have a rich teaching and research history. We are concerned that the proposed reductions will mean that the teaching capacity of mathematics and statistics department becomes too small to be viable resulting in a 'maths and statistics desert' for mature students, with Mathematics at university level becoming the preserve of only the very highest-achieving pupils. Non-traditional routes to education, such as those offered by Birkbeck, widen access to mathematics and must be preserved, if not expanded, because of the access that mathematics and statistics provide to a wide range of careers and further higher education.

As London's only specialist provider of evening higher education, Birkbeck, and the Department of Economics, Mathematics and Statistics, has a unique and crucial role in widening participation in higher education. The Birkbeck student body is diverse, including many mature students as well as those first in their families to earn a degree. Around 65% of Birkbeck students are from Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds. The UK needs to foster an ongoing flow of talented mathematicians from diverse backgrounds to continue to contribute to social and technical advances in the century ahead. Commitment to do so is consistent with many government directives, such as the UKRI's intention to 'embed equality, diversity and inclusion' in all that they do.

Experiences of mathematics departments at other universities indicate that redundancies often result in 'academic flight'; key grant holders vacate their positions, decimating departments and rendering their survival unlikely. Birkbeck may wish to consider the risk of losing its mathematics and statistics groups in an era when these subjects are becoming increasingly important to tackle a wide range of social problems from modelling a pandemic to safeguarding national security. Furthermore, risk of closure of these groups has knock-on effects such as reputation loss in the physical, biological, and social sciences where mathematics and statistics underlie nearly every major breakthrough.

We believe it is vital that teaching of the subjects at undergraduate and postgraduate levels remains viable and urge the University to reconsider the proposed changes, before irreversible cuts are made, and student education and research impacted.

As professional and learned societies, who believe in the value of mathematics and statistics to the UK economy, and the fundamental role the subjects play in other disciplines, we express serious concern about the impact proposed cuts will have to the teaching, study and research of mathematics and statistics at Birkbeck.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Ulrike Tillmann', with a long, sweeping horizontal stroke at the end.

Professor Ulrike Tillmann
President, London Mathematical Society

Professor Paul Glendinning
President, Institute of Mathematics and its Applications

Professor Rachel Norman
President, Edinburgh Mathematical Society

Professor Sylvia Richardson
President, Royal Statistical Society