

12 February 2019

Professor Mark Fellowes

Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Academic Planning & Resources

University of Reading

Dear Professor Fellowes,

**Restructuring of Modern Languages Provision at the University of Reading**

As the Executive Committee of the Association of University Professors and Heads of French we are writing to express our dismay at the planned restructuring of Modern Languages provision at the University of Reading. We understand that the University is planning a merger between the Department of Modern Languages and European Studies (MLES) and the Institution Wide Language Programme (IWLP), resulting in cuts of between 8 and 13 staff FTEs across German, French, Spanish and Italian. The planned cuts would reduce the staff of MLES and IWLP from 37.68 FTE to 24.5-29.5 FTE, meaning a loss of about 30% of current staff. We also note that there are plans to drastically reduce the number of research-active staff to a minimum of 10 across the four languages and to ‘refocus’ research towards the modern and contemporary period. The restructuring is thus likely to result in the redundancy of staff who have consistently excelled in every aspect of their profession, and who enjoy the highest esteem in the discipline, both nationally and internationally.

The Department of Modern Languages and European Studies at Reading rightly prides itself on its outstanding research and high NSS results. In the most recent Research Excellence Framework assessment (REF 2014), as advertised on the University website, 98% of its research was judged to be of international standing. Its research performance was exceptionally strong and it was rated fourth in the UK for impact and fifth for research intensity. It was also commended for the effective integration of doctoral students into the research environment. The Department’s REF 2014 performance was not at all out of line with that of other Humanities UoAs at Reading.

The reason for the planned restructuring that was given to staff is a claimed deficit in Modern Languages. We wonder to what extent this deficit is out of line with those in other Humanities departments, and indeed elsewhere in the institution or in other Universities. It is worth pointing out that language departments are not nearly as expensive to run as is sometimes thought. Modern Languages Departments across the UK are facing a difficult environment and are finding creative and efficient ways of reducing their budgets, not least by reviewing their internal organisation and range of degrees with a view to reducing administrative burdens. Our Association would be delighted to be involved in an advisory role about such savings at Reading. While we appreciate that some tightening of the budget may be necessary, to cut staff should never be a preferred option. Experience at other universities shows that cuts to the staff base inevitably result in a downward spiral, which, in the long term, is likely to undermine a Department’s viability. In particular, staff cuts invariably reduce the study options available to students. These will impact not only on NSS scores but also on future TEF results, with inevitable implications for student recruitment (not only in the disciplines directly affected). We are concerned that the recommendation of the review comes in the context of a wider financial and governance crisis at the University of Reading (as reported by the *Guardian*, 9 February 2019). We fear that these recent pressures on the University have impacted on what appears to be both a highly rushed and ill-considered decision. Rather than putting into place brutal short-term measures what would be necessary is on the contrary to take a coherent approach to streamlining the provision that is already in place.

While we are strictly opposed to any staff cuts, we would like to point out that the recommendation to reduce research-active staff would be particularly detrimental to the Department and its finances. Losing researchers means losing the QR income that their work will attract as a result of REF assessments, not to mention possibilities of grant income, an area where the Department of Modern Languages and European Studies has excelled. Cuts to staffing would inevitably result in the loss of critical mass and environment in an exceptionally strong research cluster, which includes some of the University’s strongest impact as well as very strong REF outputs. What is more, the restrictive focus on the modern and contemporary period of the proposed future research themes would not only seriously reduce the Department’s academic breadth, but is likely to constitute an instance of constructive dismissal as it is easy to identify the individuals at risk in such a ‘refocused’ environment. In short, the planned cuts would have major long-term financial and reputational consequences for the University, which would significantly outweigh the relatively modest short-term saving made.

These plans would also impact seriously on Modern Languages provision in the UK more widely. Recent government reports and parliamentary debates have stressed the crucial importance of modern languages for the future of the UK in a global context. The HEFCE Review of Modern Foreign Languages provision in higher education in England has warned of the dangers of the UK becoming one of the most monolingual countries in the world with severe consequences for its economy, international competitiveness, reputation, and community cohesion. The British Academy, likewise, has repeatedly warned of the detrimental effects of a reduction in Modern Language provision, stressing its importance as a vehicle for understanding other societies. In the context of Brexit, it is more important than ever to form linguists and cross-cultural experts.

We urge the University of Reading to reject the recommendations of the review group and to renew its commitment to staff who have invested significantly in the institution, making a crucial contribution to its success. Any compulsory redundancies in the Department of Modern Languages and European Studies would most certainly damage Reading’s reputation as an outward-looking institution that is open to Europe and the world and compromise its integrity as a University that respects its employees and treats them fairly.

Yours sincerely,

Marion Schmid

Prof. Marion Schmid

President of the Association of University Professors and Heads of French